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George Eliot's Women Readers and the Anxiety of Female Authorship

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George Eliot's Women Readers and the Anxiety of Female Authorship

*The Female Author as Represented by the Figure of the Female Reader
in the Fiction of George Eliot, Constance Fenimore Woolson,
Edith Wharton and Dorothy Richardson*

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Abstract

This study identifies and explores a recurrent trope in transatlantic literature by women in which the fictional female reader is used as a site on which to explore the anxiety of female authorship. Through their configurations of the reading woman in their fiction, the female authors examined in this thesis attempt to reconcile themselves with the established opposition between femininity and creativity that persisted in transatlantic literary criticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As a writer who was a literary icon for subsequent women writers, and who explores this trope in a complex and often ambivalent way, George Eliot is central to this tradition. Her masculinisation in literary criticism, combined with her failure to commit fully to her androgynous model of female authorship – a model which asserted women's capacity to write in both a 'masculine' and 'feminine' way – had serious, long-lasting repercussions for subsequent female authors. Women writers were faced with an inescapable female literary role model who was at once proof of the compatibility of femininity and artistry, and yet who was frequently presented as an exception to other female authors and used to reinforce bias against women writers.

In responding to Eliot's reception and appropriating her use of the female reader in their fiction, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Edith Wharton and Dorothy Richardson added their own voices to the discussions about female authorship taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For these authors, Eliot became a point of reference from which to articulate their own attitudes towards bias against women that persisted in some branches of literary criticism. In defining their attitudes towards Eliot and the contradictory ideas she and her fiction presented, they were exploring their identities as female artists.

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Chapter One: Introduction

‘Take back your *Corinne*,’ said Maggie [...] ‘you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her.’

‘Wouldn’t you really like to be a tenth Muse, then Maggie?’ said Philip. [...]

‘Not at all,’ said Maggie, laughing. ‘The Muses were uncomfortable goddesses, I think [...] I didn’t finish the book [...] I foresaw that the light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable [...] If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, that would restore the balance.’

— George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*¹

When we consider the downward trajectory Maggie Tulliver is destined to take in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the heroine’s brief encounter with de Staël’s *Corinne, ou l’Italie* (1807) strikes a premonitory note. Eliot suggests a causal link between the messages about female creativity in her heroine’s reading and Maggie’s demise in *The Mill on the Floss*: through her reading of *Corinne*, the book which was seen by many nineteenth-century readers as ‘the book of the woman genius,’² Maggie understands that female artistry is undesirable, or ‘uncomfortable.’ In attempting to suppress her artistic ‘dark[ness]’ – that is, her capacity for imaginative engagement and her intellectual proclivities – her pent up creative energies symbolically overflow in the form of a flood which destroys her, as Corinne is destroyed at the close of de Staël’s novel.

Yet Maggie does not finish reading *Corinne*. She renounces the imaginative outlet of Romantic reading, a renunciation which might itself be seen as the cause of Maggie’s demise. The narrative hints at the possibility that Maggie would have survived if she had read *Corinne* through to the end; that like Eliot, who had read *Corinne* by the time she turned twenty-one,³ she would have finished the novel alive to the injustice of Corinne’s fate and determined to emulate the author rather than her literary heroine.

Maggie’s discussion of de Staël’s *Corinne* raises conflicting ideas about female reading and artistry which are central to this thesis. Through her reading, a woman learns that she is capable of artistry, yet that artistry may be fatal. Her engagement with the text is itself a creative process, sparking her imagination and prompting her to consider the possibility of being an artist like the heroine in the text. At the same time, *Corinne* impresses upon the reader the impossibility of becoming an artist by destroying the artist heroine. Reading is the

¹ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*. ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 332.

² Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women’s Press, 1963), pp. 173-4.

³ Eliot mentions having read the work in a letter to Maria Lewis dated 27th October 1840 when she would have been twenty years old. See Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*. 7 vols. Vol. I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 71.

occasion for Maggie's realisation of both female creative power, and the social structures that inhibit it. In Eliot's work, female 'reading' and 'creativity' are always imbricated as dual activities that bespeak women's resistance and submission to patriarchal strictures.

Eliot uses the figure of the female reader to announce the artist: unlike de Staël, who deals with the female artist explicitly, in *The Mill on the Floss*, the process by which the female artist is destroyed is expressed indirectly through the figure of the reading woman. In this way, Eliot places herself in a position that allows her to explore the issues surrounding gender and artistry on public terrain and at the same time, permits her to present these ideas in such an oblique way that their potential to cause controversy is significantly diminished.

Eliot uses her female readers in this way throughout her fiction. Over the course of her career, we find numerous instances where her fictional female readers function as veiled representations of female writers, or more broadly artists – figures which I shall refer to henceforth as female reader-writers and reader-artists. In these portraits, there is a consistent undertone of creativity, specifically of authorship, in the literal act of reading being presented on the page: the two activities often blend into one, and are visible simultaneously as we read the text.

Interestingly, when we look at Eliot's works as a whole, we frequently find that her female reader-artist figures are destroyed or diminished by the close of their narratives: Dinah Morris, who improvises sermons to the people of Hayslope based on her reading of the Bible in *Adam Bede* (1859), has been read as a reworking of de Staël's *improvisatrice* Corinne;⁴ she ends the novel having relinquished her religious vocation for the more conventional roles of wife and mother. In *Middlemarch* (1872), Dorothea Brooke seeks to enter the world of academic discourse through her reading, and the close of the novel sees her marrying and finding vicarious intellectual fulfilment through her husband. The most extreme example of the undercutting of the female reader-artist comes in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) with Gwendolen Harleth, a spoilt young woman who, finding that her aspirations do not lie comfortably in the novels she reads, conjures up fantastic, empowering scenarios in which she features as the heroine, which include her taking on the role of an opera singer and rescuing her mother and sisters from poverty. However, through a series of rejections and humiliations, she is brought to accept the bleak reality of 'a woman's life'⁵ and her flights of imagination come to an end.

This pattern arises because Eliot uses the figure of the female reader to explore both her artistic aspirations and her anxieties about her authorship: hence we find contradictory

⁴ See Moers, pp. 192-4.

⁵ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*. ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 128.

attitudes towards the relationship between women and literary authority in her representations of women reading. Alongside her criticism of patriarchal ideas about female reading and, implicitly, female authorship, Eliot's anxiety about these arguments is expressed in portraits of readers which endorse those very ideas and undermine the androgynous ideal she sought to create (this ideal will be discussed shortly). Within her fiction we encounter female characters whose engagement with texts affirms the limitations that many commentators deemed typical of female literary engagement, and female characters who challenge these ideas only to reinforce them by the close of their narratives. The prevalence of this pattern in Eliot's fiction raises questions about the author's attitudes towards female authorship, and whether she considered femininity and artistry to be compatible.

This thesis explores a unique practice, devised by Eliot, in which the fictional female reader is consistently used to recall the female artist, particularly the female author. Through her reader-artist figures, Eliot is able to explore potentially controversial ideas surrounding women's ability to produce what contemporary literary critics deemed high-quality literature, and to experiment with a range of ways in which women could, or should, relate to patriarchal social and artistic authorities. Eliot's exploration of these issues is problematic. She uses her female readers to articulate both her artistic aspirations and her anxieties about the relationship between her gender and her vocation, and as a result, she sets herself the impossible task of championing an ideal of the socially-integrated female reader with so-called masculine intellectual and artistic capabilities, whilst still giving representational force to the gendered, hierarchical concepts of superior masculine and inferior feminine artistry which prohibited such an identity. (Eliot's ideal female reader-author in whom the qualities associated with masculine and feminine authorship are combined shall be referred to henceforth as her androgynous ideal.) Alongside the Dorotheas, whose masculine intellectual capabilities the author ultimately undercuts, we also have the Rosamond Vincys who reinforce the pernicious gendered stereotypes about female literary engagement that informed some branches of literary criticism in the mid-nineteenth century.

As well as highlighting the perceived opposition between femininity and authorship, Maggie's reading of *Corinne* raises the question of how female authors reading Eliot would have responded to Maggie's demise. This thesis asks how Eliot's representations of women reading were received by female readers with artistic aspirations. As a literary icon who, by

1873, was being hailed as proof that ‘genius [was] of no sex,’⁶ Eliot’s inability or reluctance to present her androgynous female reader-author without contradiction or qualification had serious long-lasting repercussions for subsequent female authors.

Three authors in particular not only understood the ideas about authorship Eliot’s fictional female readers conveyed, but actually appropriated Eliot’s method of articulating them through the figure of the reading woman in their own fiction. Rather than making an argument for direct influence (although there are several instances of this), my main aim is to show how Eliot provided these authors with a method of expressing their aspirations and anxieties about their shared vocation. American ‘local-color’ author Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-94), Edith Wharton (1862-1937), America’s most famous novelist of manners, and British modernist Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957) all share Eliot’s preoccupation with the female reader in their fiction, and, following in Eliot’s footsteps, explore their aspirations and anxieties about their shared identity as women writers through this figure in distinct and revealing ways. Unlike Maggie, a thwarted female artist who re-enacts her reading in *The Mill on the Floss*, the responses of Woolson, Wharton and Richardson to Eliot’s oblique representations of the female artist are more wide-ranging and complex. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will trace their responses to the problems Eliot’s fiction raises, and look at the revisions they suggest to the androgynous ideal she presents as a solution. I will be reading the representations of female readers in the works of all the artists featured in this thesis as an answer to Maggie’s call to provide ‘a story where the dark woman triumphs’ and to ‘restore the balance’ for female authors. Moreover, I will claim that these authors use the female reader insistently in their fiction in order to try to locate or define an ideal artistic identity. Through the female reader these authors experiment with a range of artistic identities, and thus provide us with an insight into their perceptions of the relationship between femininity and authorship.

This group of writers forms part of a long tradition of women’s writing which sought to assert women’s capacity to produce intellectual, socially-significant works of literature. This study opens up new ground in scholarship about the female reader and the anxiety of female authorship, and demonstrates a new and revealing way in which Eliot and her work had a profound impact on the fiction of subsequent female writers in Britain and America. It also highlights how the fictional female reader functions as a versatile and revealing tool through which writers engaged with debates about gender and authorship.

⁶ Anne Mozley, ‘Review of *Adam Bede*’, *Bentley’s Quarterly Review*, 1 (Jul. 1859), 433-56 repr. in David Carroll, ed. *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 90.

Eliot's fictional female readers function in a far more complex way than it would initially appear. At first glance, Eliot's female readers seem innocuous: her characters' reading habits serve as an indicator of their capacity for empathy, and this is consistent with Eliot's reputation as a moralist. This is most starkly represented in *Adam Bede*, where the moral hero and heroine are both well versed in literature including the Bible, fiction, mathematics, and history. The fallen woman of the piece who murders her child (inadvertently or not, the reader is never certain) is one who has never read a novel.⁷

On further examination, we begin to see that Eliot's readers perform more complex roles in her fiction. We are struck by the social criticism Eliot presents through her fictional readers, notably her documentation of female social experience and the limits of that experience. As we see in her portrait of the frustrated intellectual Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot enters into contemporary debates about how women should be educated, warning of the consequences of limiting female learning, both in terms of its effect on Maggie's psychology, and on her community. This debate continues in the portraits of her heroines in *Romola* (1863) and *Middlemarch* (1872), readers in whom intellectual application and sympathy, qualities deemed masculine and feminine respectively at this time, are united. This is an ideal combination which Eliot presents as being psychologically necessary for the individual to become a force for social good. We also find in her works a defence of the romance novel as a psychological necessity, or emotional outlet for her female characters.⁸ Eliot is clearly anxious to dispel the idea of the romance as a corrupting genre: in her vision of reading, Eliot demonstrates that the impact of material is as much dependent on its contents as the psychology, specifically the moral values, of the individual who reads it. Contrary to common opinion that women were passive readers, Eliot argues via psychologised representations of reading that woman is not merely a conduit of the ideas contained within the works she is exposed to, but capable, like male readers were deemed to be, of processing and evaluating the material, and to deny her this capability is not only a crime against women, but a hindrance to society as a whole.

Thus far, my overview of Eliot's fictional female readers accords with scholarship in this area. Critics have tended to view the fictional reading woman as a conscious response to

⁷ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*. ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 192, 125.

⁸ For studies which examine the romance as a psychological necessity for women, and in this respect, a feminist genre, see Cora Kaplan, 'The Thorn Birds: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity', in *Sea Changes: Feminism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1986); Barbara Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America', in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). See also Diane Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1992), esp. p. 127.

the ideas and stereotypes employed in debates about female reading. Two examples of studies which focus almost exclusively on fictional representations of female readers are Carla L. Peterson's *The Determined Reader* (1986) and Catherine Golden's *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (2003). Peterson's psychoanalytic study focuses on the nineteenth-century idea of the dangerous 'reading habit' and shows how this is played out in English and French fiction. Golden's study deals with the motif of the female reader in a variety of media, including contemporary discourses, fiction, and also how this figure appears visually within these categories. As in Peterson's discussion, the female reader is viewed as a kind of social mirror, reflecting, and also often challenging, contemporary ideas and stereotypes about female reading and women's social role. For both critics, the female reader either upholds or offers a critical commentary on women's inferior social status.

Similarly, Kate Flint, who devotes a section of her monograph *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1993) to 'Fictional Reading' in British and American works, writes that her aim is to show that

novelists were attempting to question dominant ideas about the relationship between women's reading practices and their responses to what they read. Polemic against the common expectation that women automatically and unreflectingly identified with central women characters, or that they would be unfailingly corrupted by reading about matters concerning sexuality, was met head on within the pages of those very books which caused conservative commentators the greatest anxiety.

Her study concludes: 'The practice of reading, at once pointing inwards and outwards, to the psychological and the socio-cultural, is an ideal site for the examination of this intersection of Victorian, Edwardian, and contemporary preoccupations: bodies, minds, and texts.'⁹

Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson* (1998) approaches fictional representations of reading according to the question of whether 'mass literacy' was deemed 'wholesome' or 'poisonous.' Focussing briefly on *Don Quixote*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Madame Bovary*, he defines the fictional reader as a figure that either 'reinforce[s] the illusion that the main text is real' or highlights that it is 'removed from reality,' thus warning the reader to keep their distance from the ideas in the text.¹⁰ By contrast, Barbara Sicherman's recent study, *Well-Read Lives* (2010), examines how reading stirred ambition in women born in America

⁹ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 255, 330.

¹⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 4. See also pp. 9, 11.

between 1855 and 1875, discussing the impact of fictional readers and writers like Jo March in *Little Women* on Americans and their intellectual development.¹¹

Traditionally, scholarship surrounding the female reader has concentrated on the sociological context of women's reading, and how anxiety over women's reading practises, particularly in the nineteenth century, were informed by contemporary ideas about women's proper social place. Nina Baym (1984), Cathy Davidson (1986), Barbara Sicherman (1989, 2002), Mary Kelley (2002), Nancy Glazener (2012) and Susan M. Griffin (2012) focus on how the novel and female literary culture were constructed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹² Carla Peterson (1986), Linda Docherty (1997), Kate Flint (1986; 1996; 1993; 2012), Patrick Brantlinger (1998), Jacqueline Pearson (1999), Catherine Golden (2003), and Belinda Jack (2012) are primarily concerned with representations of reading as a reflection of or response to contemporary debates about gender and the written word.¹³ Jennifer Phegley (2004; 2005) and Barbara Sicherman (2007; 2010) argue that women readers were constructed through the medium of literature in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

¹¹ Barbara Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹² Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers, Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Barbara Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility'; Sicherman, 'Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America', in *Reading Acts*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002); Mary Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America', in *Reading Acts*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002); Nancy Glazener, 'Women in Literary Culture During the Long Nineteenth Century', in *The Cambridge History of American Women's Literature*, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Susan M. Griffin, 'Reading Women in America', in *The Cambridge History of American Women's Literature*, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹³ Carla Peterson, *The Determined Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Linda J. Docherty, 'Women as Readers: Visual Interpretations', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 107 (1997), 355-88; Kate Flint, 'The Woman Reader and the Opiate of Fiction: 1855-1870', in *The Nineteenth Century British Novel*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1986); Flint, 'Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*', in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. J. Raven, Helen Small and N. Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*; Flint, 'Reading, Prohibition and Transgression', in *Dickens and Victorian Print Cultures*, ed. Robert L. Patten (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson*; Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain: 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Catherine J. Golden, *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Belinda Jack, *The Woman Reader* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Jennifer Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); Jennifer Phegley, 'I Should No More Think of Dictating... What Kinds of Books She Should Read': Images of Women Readers in Victorian Family Literary Magazines', in *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present*, ed. Janet Badia and Jennifer Phegley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Barbara Sicherman, 'Ideologies and Practices of Reading', in *A History of the Book in America, Volume 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, ed. Scott E. Casper, et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*.

However, my approach differs to this scholarship. My focus is not the sociological context of reading, nor the representation of the female reader as a mirror to women's changing social status, but the way in which the female reader is used by the authors studied in this thesis to explore a network of concerns about women's creativity and social power in a patriarchal society. I see the fictional female reader not only as a response to contemporary ideas about gender and reading, but also paradoxically as a site on which authors may explore a range of ideas about female authorship. Eliot sets her readers within a continuum, in which one extreme, that of active reading, is akin to authorship. The process of authorship is evoked through her readers' creative engagement with the texts they read. We think of Dinah Morris, for example, who puts aside her Bible and instead improvises an affecting sermon to the people of Hayslope in *Adam Bede*. Through her improvisation, Dinah is also performing another kind of authorship, that of self-definition: questioning and rejecting the dominant ideas about how women should behave that are encoded within the text she reads, Dinah presents herself to her community as an independent thinker and a leader, and thus empowers herself socially. By engaging actively with a text, she writes her own identity. Women who read passively like Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* sit at the other end of Eliot's continuum, and are socially disempowered through their failure to question and respond to the messages about femininity presented to them in their reading. The lives of such readers are marred by their culture's limited conception of their mental capabilities and their proper social role. Whilst the active female reader-author is socially empowered, the female passive reader becomes a product and victim of patriarchal values.

These ideas about social identity and empowerment have been influenced by theories about the psychology of reading. I was struck very early on in my research by the idea espoused by Barbara Sicherman, that through literature, many women

found in reading a way of apprehending the world that enabled them to overcome some of the confines of gender and class. Reading provided space – physical, temporal, and psychological – that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation. The freedom of imagination women found in books encouraged new self-definitions.¹⁵

Women not only read themselves into texts, they also playacted favorite parts [...] reading became a staging ground for rehearsing future selves.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility', p. 202.

¹⁶ Barbara Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism', *American Quarterly*, 45 (1993), 73-103, p. 78.

This idea of a ‘staging-ground,’ which I return to again and again in this thesis, is supported by modern psychological theory. Modern theorists have debated how the boundaries between the reader and the text should be defined, and I provide a brief overview of their arguments here. Freud’s idea of narcissistic introjection into the text was developed in a series of studies, most notably by Norman Holland in his *Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968), in which he argues that phantasies that cannot bypass the censorship of the superego in explicit form are introjected into the literature we read.¹⁷ Georges Poulet, Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher have challenged this dominant idea of the reader’s ‘narcissistic alliance’ with the text in favour of a more dialogic model of interaction between the reader and the text. Georges Poulet’s essay ‘The Phenomenology of Reading’ (1969) concludes that the reader’s identity becomes suspended in a grey area between subjectivity and objectivity where what is read ‘becomes’ the reader’s: ‘Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an *I*, and yet the *I* which I pronounce is not myself.’¹⁸ This neutral model, in which neither the text nor the narcissistic desires of the reader have dominance, is a useful point of comparison for the models constructed within the fiction I will be examining, particularly in terms of whether the female reader is presented as a conduit to the messages in the text, or whether she is presented projecting meaning into it.

I have found Alcorn and Bracher’s idea of reading as the expansion of the reader’s ‘cognitive map’ through vicarious experience especially useful in my research. Depending on the individual’s choice of reading, they argue that the reader may be prompted to imagine ‘settings, cultures, lifestyles,’ ‘behavior,’ or psychologies with which they are unfamiliar, thereby alerting them to ‘the existence and significance of phenomena,’ both mental and physical, to which they would ‘otherwise be insensitive or oblivious.’¹⁹ At a time when female social experience was deliberately limited, we can immediately see why nineteenth and early twentieth-century commentators were often anxious about the material to which women were exposed. The female reader might be exposed to a limitless range of ideas or experiences, provided she was given the (in)appropriate text.

The Climate from which Eliot’s Female Reader-Author Emerged

Eliot was not the first writer to present women reading and writing, either in literal or figurative form, in her fiction. The fictional female reader was a staple in nineteenth-century

¹⁷ See Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 89.

¹⁸ Georges Poulet, ‘The Phenomenology of Reading’, *New Literary History*, 1 (1969), 53-68, p. 56.

¹⁹ Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. and Mark Bracher, ‘Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction for Reader-Response Theory’, *PMLA*, 100 (1985), 342-54, pp. 344-5.

realist literature; understandably so, as reading was a common pastime for women. Besides heightening the mimetic realism of a text, it was also a convenient way for writers to allude to other works or textual models in their writing.²⁰ On a more symbolic level, the female reader was a recognisable emblem of woman gaining access to knowledge from which she was excluded, as the questions surrounding female education were contentious in Britain and America at this time.

Whilst not as commonplace as the female reader, bookish heroines who took up the pen, either in literal or metaphorical form, feature persistently in women's fiction on both sides of the Atlantic in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For instance, a portion of Judith Sargent Murray's *The Gleaner* (1798) comprises a sentimental novella narrated by two well-read female characters, a mother and a daughter, under the thin guise of an exchange of letters.²¹ Jane Austen's Catherine Morland writes outlandish narratives about goings on in the abbey based on her reading of Ann Radcliffe in the gothic parody *Northanger Abbey* (1817). In Catherine Maria Sedgwick's novel about the importance of literacy, *Live and Let Live* (1837), both the servant-girl heroine Lucy Lee and her society are served well by her ability to read and write.²² Charlotte Brontë's most famous book-hungry heroine narrates her story in *Jane Eyre* (1847).²³

The prevalence of women reading and writing in fiction is symptomatic of a broad cultural preoccupation with the relationship between women and the written word in this period. This preoccupation can be traced back to the change in the status of the female author in late eighteenth-century Britain and early nineteenth-century America. The new conservatism prevailing in Britain in the 1790s in response to the radicalism and violence of the French Revolution brought with it a repressive regime which rejected the idea of the perfectibility of human nature and the call for gender equality. Whereas the 'bluestocking' had flourished from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, by the turn of the century, the 'domestic' woman was the new ideal.²⁴ Respectable women were now seen as modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship of any kind entailed publicity, thrusting

²⁰ See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, pp. 255-6.

²¹ See Kristin Wilcox, 'The Scribblings of a Plain Man and the Temerity of a Woman: Gender and Genre in Judith Sargent Murray's *The Gleaner*', *Early American Literature*, 30 (1995), 121-44, p. 125.

²² See Sarah Robbins, 'Periodizing Authorship, Characterizing Genre: Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Benevolent Literacy Narratives', *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 76 (2004), 1-29, p. 15.

²³ For an analysis of Jane's reading in the novel, see Golden, *Images of the Woman Reader*, pp. 153-8.

²⁴ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 196-9, 228-9; Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790-1827* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 21ff.

oneself before the public eye, and therefore immediately robbed the female author of her femininity.²⁵ A similar backlash resulted from the American Revolution: whilst in 1798, it was held that 'the Rights of Women' were at last coming to be understood and a new era for women and women authors was predicted, by the 1830s, the changing social role of women and their increasing influence in politics caused widespread panic. At this time, female authorship was deemed a transgressive act, and symbolised women straying from the genteel domestic sphere in which they were supposed to dwell and infringing on the masculine public sphere.²⁶ From this point, then, female authorship was a volatile issue in Britain and America, and arguments about this figure became increasingly frequent and vehement as the nineteenth century progressed. For reasons which I shall discuss shortly, these debates led up to a discursive explosion surrounding women's engagement with the written word which began in the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the early decades of the twentieth century.

The increased visibility of women in the literary sphere in the mid-nineteenth century was due to three main interrelated factors which made literature more accessible to women: advances in printing and production methods, reforms in female education, and the growth of the first-wave feminist movement. As a result of these factors, there were repeated cries that women were coming to dominate the literary scene.²⁷ As W. R. Greg wrote in 1859, the number of young female writers 'passes calculation, and was unparalleled at any former epoch. Indeed, the supply of the fiction market has fallen mainly into their hands.'²⁸ In 1865, Bessie Rayner Parkes confidently claimed that the British literary field had been conquered by women.²⁹ Women writers were dominating fiction sales across the board in America, with one publisher, G. P. Putnam, sending Nathaniel Hawthorne \$144 for a year's royalties on *Mosses from an Old Manse* and Susan Warner \$4,500 for six month's sales of *The Wide, Wide World* in 1853. In 1872, nearly three-quarters of all published writers in America were female.³⁰ As the nineteenth-century drew to a close, anxieties about women taking over the literary marketplace shifted towards women readers who fuelled the demand for fiction

²⁵ Jan Fergus, 'The Professional Woman Writer', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 2.

²⁶ Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ See Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 101; see also Kate Flint, 'Women Writers, Women's Issues', in *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 172.

²⁸ W. R. Greg, 'The False Morality of Lady Novelists', *The National Review*, 15 (Jan. 1859), 144-67, p. 149.

²⁹ Bessie Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Women's Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1865), p. 121.

³⁰ Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Literary Issues, 1837-1883*. 3 vols. Vol. III (London: Garland, 1983), p. 47; Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 2.

written by women. Women, the primary consumers of print, constituted the larger part of the new, supposedly uneducated mass readership that was driving the literary market as a result of rising levels of basic literacy: frequently, 'shop-girls, seamstresses and domestic servants' were condemned for reading 'cheap and nasty' penny novelettes, thereby increasing the demand for such lower forms of literature.³¹ By the early decades of the twentieth century, the dominance of women as readers and writers seemed a foregone conclusion to many, with critics like Robert Herrick lamenting that American novels were 'written largely by women and for the entertainment of women' and complaining that 'our literature should represent both sexes and interest both sexes.'³² A more hysterical response came from Joseph Hergesheimer, who reported that 'stories published serially are read by something like ten thousand women to every one man. Women have set the standard, determined the tone, of the characteristic American novel.' He concluded: 'literature in the United States is being strangled with a petticoat.'³³

Eliot was not alone in her preoccupation with female readers (and by implication, female authors); however there were two factors in Eliot's treatment of the woman reader that distinguished her from her contemporaries. The first of these was the insistence with which this figure was used in her writing. Whilst women readers appear in the majority of fiction written in the nineteenth century, Eliot's preoccupation with female reading is striking. Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1993) has shown that there were a range of images of the female reader in contemporary discourses at this time, but Eliot's fiction provides us with her own catalogue of reading women: women reading in groups as part of a social activity, poring over novels and poetry in isolation, and conjuring up fantasies stimulated by their reading. We also see them attempting to take on masculine roles by looking at the textbooks of older brothers, trying to invade the libraries of academic husbands, imparting their wisdom to others by supervising their reading, and where these invasions into male literary territory fail, taking solace in the escape offered them by novels and romances. Even before we look at these figures in any detail, it is clear that the female reader is a resonant figure for Eliot.

The second distinctive element in Eliot's treatment of the female reader is the degree to which this figure is constructed around gendered ideas about how the individual engages

³¹ Edward Salmon, 'What the Working Classes Read', *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (Jul. 1886), 108-17, p. 112.

³² Robert Herrick, 'The American Novel', *Yale Review*, 3 (Apr. 1914), 419-37, repr. in Gordon Hutner, ed. *American Literature, American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 173.

³³ Joseph Hergesheimer, 'The Feminine Nuisance in American Literature', *Yale Review*, 10 (Jul. 1921), 716-25, pp. 716, 718.

with literature. Her androgynous ideal insistently makes use of the two gendered stereotypes employed in some branches of nineteenth-century literary criticism, which enforced the idea that masculine literary engagement was superior to its feminine counterpart. In her attempt to combine these polar opposites in her fictional female readers, Eliot created a vein of tension in her writing, a tension which surfaces and remains unresolved.

There have been many studies addressing contemporary definitions of feminine literary engagement,³⁴ of which I will provide only a brief overview here. What is important to note is that these definitions were used in a way that belittled and discouraged female engagement with the written word. A text, whether written or read, was viewed as a potential threat to patriarchal authority. Many commentators wanted to curb female reading and writing practices to restore the gender hierarchy that had hitherto been at work in the literary sphere in Britain and America. Instantly, then, we can see why Eliot's dependence on these categories proves to be so problematic in her representations of women reading in her fiction.

According to these commentators, the fundamental problem with female readers and writers was that, as the *Saturday Review* claimed in 1865, 'female nature, mental as well as physical, is essentially receptive and not creative.'³⁵ Like Emma Bovary, who is poisoned by her reading, symbolically tasting, sweating, and finally vomiting a dark ink-like substance in the closing chapters of *Madame Bovary* (1856), female readers and writers were seen to reproduce and even embody poisonous messages about female sexual identity.³⁶ The literature women engaged with, either as readers or writers, threatened to displace patriarchal law as the authority on women's identity.

Let us look at the parallels between stereotypical images of the female reader and writer. Each of their shared characteristics stems from the idea of the female intellect being

³⁴ Notable contributions to this field of study include Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983); *The Woman Question* (1983) edited by Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterback Sheets and William Veeder; Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989); Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Molly Abel Travis, *Reading Cultures: The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998); Nicola Diane Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1996); Alexis Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity: George Eliot in the 1850s', *Women's Writing*, 3 (1996), 145-60; Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Power in Victorian Culture: Harriet Martineau and the Periodical Press', in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. Laurel Brake, Bill Bell, and David Finkelstein (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000); Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70*; Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011); Kate Flint, 'The Woman Reader and the Opiate of Fiction'; Flint, 'Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*'; Flint, 'Women Writers, Women's Issues'.

³⁵ 'Female Intellect', *Saturday Review*, 19 (Mar. 25 1865), 336-8, pp. 336-7.

³⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*. trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 295, 296, 310.

inferior, and woman's propensity towards moral (read: sexual) corruption. These figures were characterised by their poor taste in literature, their tendency to imitate (a result of an inferior intellect), their narcissism, and the sexually transgressive behaviour that would result from their engagement with texts. The female reader was often presented reading 'the trashy, exciting story' or 'low romance' typically churned out by her writing counterpart.³⁷ The books these women were associated with dealt with 'sentimental woes' and 'drawing room distresses' – in which case the material was unoriginal, and bespoke a lack of taste and intellect on the part of both reader and writer – otherwise, particularly with the advent of the sensation novel in the 1860s, the female reader and author were often charged with transgressing the bounds of female experience and propriety by indulging in scandalous narratives about extra-marital affairs, bigamy and violent crime.³⁸ In either case, the text was replete with undesirable models of female behaviour which, it was feared, impressionable female readers and their creators would unthinkingly imitate. In other words, female readers and writers would become conduits to the messages in the texts they were consuming and producing, and this posed a danger not only to themselves but their families, friends, and the fabric of society as a whole. In response to Charlotte Brontë's early literary efforts, Robert Southey famously stated that '[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it [...] To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity.'³⁹ Similarly, in 1827 the American poet Lydia Sigourney was told that she was driven to write by a 'lust of praise, which like the *appetite* of the cormorant is not to be satisfied' and 'an apparently unconquerable *passion* of displaying herself.'⁴⁰ In a woman, claims to being a literary artist were not only vanity masquerading as truth, but were tantamount to a denial of her proper biological and social role, and therefore constituted a sexual transgression.

The corruption that ensued from female literary engagement was more readily sexualised in discourses about reading women. Take, for instance, a fictional anecdote in the

³⁷ Edna D. Cheney, 'A Mother's Thought', in *The Education of American Girls*, ed. Anna C. Brackett (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1874), p. 137.

³⁸ See 'Reade's *It's Never Too Late To Mend*', *Spectator*, xxix (16 August 1856), 877-8, p. 877; Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 (1863), 481-514, pp. 490-502.

³⁹ Letter from Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837, in Margaret Smith, ed., *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. 3 vols. Vol. I (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 165-8.

⁴⁰ Letter from her husband, Oct. 1827, quoted in Ann Douglas Wood, 'Mrs. Sigourney and the Sensibility of the Inner Space', *New England Quarterly*, 45 (1972), 163-81, p. 166.

American *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (1855) about a daughter 'left at liberty to choose her own books':

Writers of fiction absorbed all her hours. Circulating libraries were ransacked, that she might find the most stimulating novels [...] The love-tales of her favourite authors inflamed her imagination. She dreamed and spoke of splendid matches, till she became quite unfitted for the matter-of-fact world in which her lot was cast. As for domestic duties, they were too common-place for so gay a young lady [...] Her course downward was fearfully rapid. [...] Golden dreams of sinful pleasure – the creation of novel-reading – ended in disgrace, ruin, disease, a broken heart, and an untimely grave! She passed into eternity without hope [...] leaving behind her two unhappy infants, to perpetuate her shame.⁴¹

Here, selfish indulgence in 'sinful pleasure' brings with it two illegitimate children who, like the rest of the female reader's family, are 'disgrace[d]' by her fall. Something like this scenario of moral degeneration, followed by licentiousness and death is acted out in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a novel in which we find the archetypal embodiment of the romance reader in fiction. Like the nameless daughter in the *Wesleyan-Methodist* article, Emma Bovary's reading leads to a downward spiral of extra-marital affairs, neglect of her 'womanly duties,' a slow and agonising suicide and the destruction of the family unit: her husband, discovering his wife's infidelities after her death, dies broken-hearted and destitute, and her daughter, now an orphan, is put to work in a cotton mill where her prospects are bleak.⁴² As the moral centre of the family, the exposure of the wife to improper reading material – that is, material which presented female models of behaviour that deviated from patriarchal ideas about womanhood – threatened the 'moral sanctity of the home' and the very fabric of nineteenth-century patriarchal society.⁴³

Women writers and commentators, Eliot included, responded to these ideas about female literary engagement in a variety of different ways, and were particularly vocal from the mid-nineteenth century onwards when, for reasons referred to earlier, women's presence in the literary sphere was most strongly felt. With added authority given to women's views, and more opportunities to express them in literary form, particularly fiction, traditional patriarchal viewpoints were now faced with a variety of challenges which were difficult to dismiss. There were now countless voices of dissent whose arguments were credited and needed to be addressed. As a result, on both sides of the argument views on female literary engagement, and the Woman Question that underpinned those views, fragmented. Heated debates broke out in a variety of media.

⁴¹ 'What is the Harm of Novel-Reading?', *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 78 (Oct. 1855), 932-4, p. 933.

⁴² For an analysis of Emma's reading in Flaubert's novel, see Golden, pp.100-6.

⁴³ Jennifer Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*, p. 3; see also Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Wiltshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 5.

The responses of female writers and intellectuals to these figures varied widely. In the mid-nineteenth century, many women echoed the established replies to such criticism: in the preface to the 1831 edition of her most famous work *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley played down her role in the creative process, describing how the dream on which the novel is based was inspired by a conversation between Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, to which she was 'a devout but nearly silent listener.'⁴⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell took a similar approach when defending her friend Charlotte Brontë against criticisms of 'coarseness' in reviews of her writing in England and America: she insisted on her womanliness, asserting that she was a dutiful daughter and carer first, and an ambitious writer second.⁴⁵ American critic Margaret Sweat tried to excuse the Brontë sisters for the 'coarse' subject matter of their novels (American commentators particularly disliked the 'strong-minded' women in their fiction),⁴⁶ writing that the material, being drawn from personal circumstance, '[was] not selected by them, but thrust upon them by circumstances clamorous for utterance.'⁴⁷

However, at the same time, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards female commentators were becoming increasingly bold in their contradiction or dismissal of biased representations of female reading and authorship. Challenging assumptions that female literary engagement was characterised by emotional and narcissistic investment in texts, serial publications in particular allowed female commentators to insist on women's capacity to engage with social and political issues in an intelligent and logical way. Serial publications became an established means of female 'discursive intervention' and a mode of female 'creative and political expression' within the literary sphere which challenged the idea that femininity made a woman's thoughts socially and politically irrelevant, and their expression undesirable.⁴⁸ Sheila Herstein claims that the origins of organised feminism in Britain can be traced back to the Langham Place offices of the *English Woman's Journal*, which was established in response to the Married Women's Property Campaign in the 1850s.⁴⁹ Along with several successors including *Victoria* magazine, the *English Woman's Journal* produced fiction by women which debated contentious issues such as laws for women surrounding

⁴⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 8.

⁴⁵ See Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 377.

⁴⁶ See Helsing, Sheets, and Veeder, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Margaret Sweat, 'Unsigned Review of Gaskell's *Life*', *North American Review*, 85 (Oct. 1857), 293-329, repr. in Miriam Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 379.

⁴⁸ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 19.

⁴⁹ See Sheila Herstein, 'The Langham Place Circle and Feminist Periodicals of the 1860s', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26 (1993), 24-27, p. 24.

marriage, separation, divorce, and child custody. A similar story was to be found in America, where feminist periodicals proliferated in the 1850s: feminist magazines such as the *Lily* (established 1849), which was originally intended as a platform for discussions of temperance, quickly became a platform for the radical feminists of the era. Its pages were dominated by discussions of women's employment, absent fathers, domestic tyranny and women's political enfranchisement.⁵⁰

From the 1860s onwards, female commentators were drawn to debates about the impact of the sensation novel on female readers. Changing practices of reading and consumption in the latter half of the nineteenth century meant that the genre came to be very popular and was associated primarily with women. As a result, stereotypes of the female reader and author were employed more frequently than before in literary criticism as commentators worried about the impact of such works on the female population. Associated with mass-production and cheap thrills, the sensation novel was widely regarded as an artistically redundant, ephemeral and formulaic commodity amongst literary critics.⁵¹ Henry Mansel famously described the sensation novel as a 'morbid phenomenon' which was 'called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite' amongst its female readers.⁵² In Britain in 1867, Margaret Oliphant dismissed what she deemed a specifically male anxiety over the impact of sensation novels on female readers, claiming that sensational works offered women 'amusement and mental food' as well as 'a portrait of their own minds' which female readers did not disown: 'the perplexing fact is,' she said wryly, 'that the subjects of this slander make no objections to it.'⁵³

Mary Braddon, whose *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) was not far behind Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) in American sales,⁵⁴ gave a fictional response to fears over women's propensity to become addicted to novels in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). This novel was written in response to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), a novel which Braddon evidently understood as a validation of the misogynistic commentaries about women readers emerging in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike Flaubert's novel, the moral of which Braddon found to

⁵⁰ See Amy Beth Aronson, *Taking Liberties: Early American Women's Magazines and their Readers* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), esp. pp. 123-5.

⁵¹ Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p. 8.

⁵² Mansel, p. 483.

⁵³ Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's*, 102 (1867), 257-80, pp. 259-60.

⁵⁴ The New York *Journalist* claimed that at least one million copies of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1867) were sold in 1887 (the year of author's death) alone in America. See Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 144, 145.

be suspect,⁵⁵ the blame for the heroine's destructive reading habits in *The Doctor's Wife* is laid firmly at the door of the male authority figures in her life. The sexual and emotional inadequacy of her marriage, combined with her inadequate education, drives Braddon's heroine to seek solace in cheap literature.⁵⁶ Only when Isabel overcomes the repressive social mechanisms she has internalised (of which her poor reading choices are a symptom) can she then undertake a process of self-development and self-fulfilment.⁵⁷ As Lyn Pykett has noted, the novel does not plot a downward spiral but is a developmental narrative,⁵⁸ which ends with Isabel as a reformed woman, a reader of biography and moral philosophy, and now equipped for philanthropic pursuits.

As well as debates about the sensation novel, the 1860s and 1870s also saw biological arguments against women's higher education and intellectual pursuits, including reading and authorship, gain momentum. The arguments of patriarchal commentators, whose ideas were galvanised by the works of evolutionary theorists such as Herbert Spencer and Edward Clarke, were met with indignation by many female commentators.⁵⁹ Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the first woman in Britain to qualify as a doctor, directly refuted the biological evidence cited in an article by Henry Maudsley in 1874 which advised that women's primary function, reproduction, would be placed in jeopardy by mental exertion, and therefore women should not be educated to the same standard as men.⁶⁰

Would, for instance, the ladies who for five years have been trying to get a medical education at Edinburgh find their task increased, or immeasurably lightened, by being allowed to contend 'on equal terms with men' for that goal? The intellectual work required from other medical students is nothing compared with what it has been made to them by obliging them to spend time and energy in contesting every step of their course, and yet in spite of this heavy additional burden they have not at present shown any signs of enfeebled health or of inadequate mental power.⁶¹

⁵⁵ See Braddon's letter to Bulwer Lytton, Summer 1864, in Jennifer Camell, *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Study of Her Life and Work* (Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000), p. 216.

⁵⁶ Braddon writes '[i]f there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organise her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her.' Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, ed. Lyn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 29.

⁵⁷ For a comparison of female reading in Braddon's and Flaubert's novels, see Ann Heilmann, 'Emma Bovary's Sisters: Infectious Desire and Female Reading Appetites in Mary Braddon and George Moore', *Victorian Review*, 29 (2003), 31-48.

⁵⁸ Lyn Pykett, 'Introduction', in *The Doctor's Wife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xv.

⁵⁹ See in particular Herbert Spencer, *Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1895) and Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education; Or, a Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1873).

⁶⁰ See Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and Education', *Fortnightly Review*, 15 (Apr. 1874), 466-83, pp. 473-4, 477; his article refers to evidence from American professor Edward Clarke's *Sex in Education*.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, 'Sex in Mind and Education: A Reply', *Fortnightly Review*, 15 (June 1874), 582-94, pp. 585, 589.

American author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Story of Avis* (1877) also responded to such biological arguments, but in the context of female creativity. This work involves a female artist whose talent is destroyed by the responsibilities of wifehood, the home, and motherhood, all for which, the narrative insists, Avis has no natural inclination.

Not all responses from women were quite so adverse. With the growth of the suffrage movement towards the end of the century on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, many female commentators on issues such as education were anxious not to be mistaken for militant feminists. In 1898, American essayist Helen Moody Watterson claimed that women's educational opportunities had been so poor in the previous century that it was no wonder that Mary Wollstonecraft was compelled to write her 'lawyer-like' *Vindication* (1792), however she was quick to note that Wollstonecraft's central idea that 'women were created to be human beings first and women second' was somewhat of an 'over-statement.'⁶² Watterson's timid criticism of female education standards – not in the present time, or even the same continent, we note, but safely in the past and abroad – was taken up in a different, more aggressive form by the South-African author Olive Schreiner in 1911, who condemned the female education system in America for having stunted women's intellectual development, thereby forcing them into the only intellectual role open to them – authorship:

[The female writer is] merely finding outlets for [her] powers in the direction of least mental resistance. The tendency of women at the present day to undertake certain forms of labor proves only that in the cramped, walled-in, and bound conditions surrounding woman at the present day, these are the lines along which action is most possible to her [...] Even in the little third-rate novelist [...] may lie buried a sound legislator, an able architect, an original scientific investigator, or a good judge.⁶³

Taking Helen Moody Watterson's argument into more polemical terrain, Schreiner explains the rise in female authorship as a response to the broad social subjugation of women and a symptom of women's increasing prominence into the public sphere. In this sense, female authorship was also symptom of the strengthening wider feminist movement.

As we will see in the next chapter, Eliot's thinking about authorship and feminism was not far removed from Schreiner's. She saw her fiction as a tool through which her female readers could empower themselves socially, and this can be seen in her fictional representations of women reading, which describe a relationship between women and patriarchal authority.

⁶² Helen Moody Watterson, *The Unquiet Sex* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 102.

⁶³ Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labor*. 2nd edn (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911), pp. 162-3.

Eliot's contribution to the discursive explosion surrounding female literary engagement is not, of course, restricted to her representations of female readers. In fact a significant part of the impact she made on these debates in Britain and America – an aspect which is imperative to our understanding of her relationship with the three subsequent authors examined in this study – was through her status as a literary icon. Her arguments about female creativity and its social implications would not have had the impact they had on female authors if Eliot had been a more obscure writer. By looking at Eliot's status in British and American literary culture, we can begin to gauge the reasons for her significance to women authors. We will gain a better understanding of why the writers examined in this thesis felt compelled to use her as a touchstone from which to construct their own literary identities, and why, as later chapters will demonstrate, their attitudes towards her were so ambivalent.

Eliot's Contribution to the Debate: As Literary Icon and Author

Revered as the 'the greatest woman who ever won literary fame,' if not the greatest 'living artist,' 'peer[less]' 'in her own province,'⁶⁴ it was undoubtedly George Eliot who had the greatest impact on attitudes towards female engagement in British and American literary culture. The critical success of female literary artists throughout this period, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, dealt blows to patriarchal views of female authorship, prompting commentators like C. C. Everett to admit that 'the difference which has hitherto supposed to exist between [male and female literary artists] is not [...] founded upon the nature of things.'⁶⁵ Eliot's continuing artistic achievements, particularly *Middlemarch* in 1872, made it difficult to sustain the critical clichés regarding women novelists who were unable to depict psychological struggles other than their own, and their refusal to deal with broad social and intellectual issues.⁶⁶ Eliot was an icon for female writers, her existence proof that women could write 'high quality' fiction and be accepted amongst the artistic elite in the literary sphere.

If Eliot was the vindicator of female literary artists, however, this position was reliant on her masculinisation in literary culture, which demonstrates how contentious the debate about gender and authorship had become. Periodicals like the *Southern Review* were not alone in asserting that 'George Eliot truly possesses an intellect which is so far above

⁶⁴ Leslie Stephen, 'George Eliot', *Cornhill*, 43 (Feb. 1881), 152-68, p. 152; 'The Genius of George Eliot', p. 208.

⁶⁵ C. C. Everett, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *North American Review*, 85 (1857), 415-41, p. 417.

⁶⁶ Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, p. 78.

ordinary womanhood as to include the strength and grasp, the critical acumen and large outlook of a man.’⁶⁷

Of course, Eliot was not the first writer to be dubbed masculine. Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were often condemned for their so-called coarse, unladylike writing.⁶⁸ Similarly, American poet Lydia Sigourney and novelist Fanny Fern were subject to hostile reviews of their work which dubbed them unfeminine.⁶⁹ But what distinguished Eliot was that the epithet was almost universally applied to her in terms of praise. Eliot entered the literary marketplace at a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult for critics to disparage women’s writing on the basis that it was masculine. Through her reception, Eliot led the way in a transitional period as the status of the female author was revised in Britain and America. This accounts for the similarity in Eliot’s reception on both sides of the Atlantic, and why, as I will shortly be demonstrating, she occupied such an important place for British and American female authors.

Even before we bring her fiction into the equation, it is clear that Eliot was an icon, albeit a problematic one, who carried great weight for female literary artists. Her acceptance amongst literary critics as one of the great intellectuals of her age was part of the attraction her writing presented to subsequent female authors, and part of the reason, therefore, why she was so widely read. For some female authors, Eliot’s acceptance as a masculine writer represented a breakthrough in the reception of female authors. Essayist and journal editor Anne Mozley wrote that Eliot was placed ‘fairly side by side’ with male artists,⁷⁰ while others saw her writing as a milestone in the feminist cause. American writers Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps associated her with John Stuart Mill and saw her ‘bringing in [...] the day of women’s co-equal reign.’⁷¹ Whilst Eliot was presented to American audiences more emphatically as a feminist,⁷² she was often presented as a feminist author in Britain too. When, after Eliot’s death, Mathilde Blind wrote a biography of Eliot (1883) in the *Famous*

⁶⁷ ‘The Genius of George Eliot’, p. 206.

⁶⁸ See June Sturrock, ‘Literary Women of the 1850s and Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *Dynevor Terrace*’, in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 118-9; Cora Kaplan, ‘Introduction’, in *Aurora Leigh* (London: Women’s Press, 1977), p. 13.

⁶⁹ See Ann Douglas Wood, ‘Mrs. Sigourney’, p. 166, and Wood, ‘The “Scribbling Women” and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote’, *American Quarterly*, 23 (1971), 3-24, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁰ Anne Mozley, ‘Our Female Novelists’, *Christian Remembrancer*, 38 Oct 1859, quoted in Joanne Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p. 107.

⁷¹ Writing to Eliot, Phelps claimed that *Middlemarch* had affirmed her belief that ‘no woman should accept wifehood as a *métier*.’ Letter from Phelps to George Eliot, Feb. 26 1873, in Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*. Vol. V, p. 388; letter from Stowe to Eliot, 25 May 1869, quoted in Marlene Springer, ‘Stowe and Eliot: An Epistolary Friendship’, *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 9 (1986), 59-81, p. 63.

⁷² See Alison Booth, ‘Feminist George Eliot Comes to the United States’, in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), esp. pp. 252-3.

Women series (this featured female authors and feminists such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké, George Sand, Emily Brontë, Maria Edgeworth and Margaret Fuller), she identified *Middlemarch* as a feminist work in its call for the improvement of women's education standards, citing Eliot's donation to Girton, the first female college at Cambridge university, as proof of her desire to 'secur[e] the political enfranchisement of women.'⁷³

Understandably, Eliot became a figure of personal significance to many female authors, who wished to imitate, or even be her. Several writers, such as Mary Chavelita Dunne (George Egerton) and Sarah Orne Jewett (Alice Eliot), alluded to George Eliot in their literary pseudonyms. Others like Emily Dickinson, who referred to the author as 'my George Eliot' in her correspondence, claimed Eliot as their own.⁷⁴ Even a writer as avant-garde as Gertrude Stein was influenced by Eliot: Stein memorised Eliot's poem 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible,' and named an early story she wrote as a student in 1894, 'In the Red Deeps,' after *The Mill on the Floss*.⁷⁵

There were exceptions to this, however. Several women writers confessed that they felt intimidated by Eliot's success and were disconcerted that, whilst she had eluded the traditional prejudices and restrictions meted out to female authors, they remained subject to them. Critics often praised Eliot by holding her up in contrast to 'the usual lady novelist,' with one reviewer stating '[w]e don't know any Englishwoman who can be placed near her as a writer of prose.'⁷⁶ 'She was so consciously "George Eliot,"' wrote Eliza Lynn Linton in 1899, 'so interpenetrated, head and heel, inside and out, with the sense of her importance as the great novelist and profound thinker of her generation, as to make her society a little overwhelming, leaving us baser creatures the impression of having been rolled very flat indeed.'⁷⁷ In the same year, Margaret Oliphant, a writer who had been compelled to write in order to support her family, confessed to being 'a little envious' of Eliot. She wrote that the 'freedom from human ties' Eliot had enjoyed compared to her own 'handicapped' writing career, in which she 'carr[ied] a whole little world with [her] whenever [she] moved,' was 'a

⁷³ See Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), pp. 245-6.

⁷⁴ George Egerton was the pen name for Mary Chavelita Dunne (1859-1945), and Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) submitted her early manuscripts under the name Alice Eliot. For Jewett, see Francis Otto Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 32. For Emily Dickinson, see her letter to Louise and Frances Norcross in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1960), p. 700.

⁷⁵ See Ulla E. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises: 1923-1934* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. 191n46; see also Moers, pp. 65-6.

⁷⁶ See 'Review of *Silas Marner*', *Saturday Review*, 11 (Apr. 1861), 369-70, p. 370, and [E. S. Dallas], 'Review of *Felix Holt*', *The Times* (26 Jun. 1866), 6, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Elaine Showalter, 'The Greening of Sister George', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 292-311, p. 294.

little justification' for her sense of 'failure' as an artist compared to the 'praise[d]' and 'honour[ed]' Eliot. 'Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?' she asked.⁷⁸ To Oliphant's mind, Eliot had never been forced, as most women like herself had been forced, to place the needs of others above her art.

Given that these women's objections resulted from Eliot's status as a masculine exception amongst female literary artists, it is unsurprising that they often disparaged the author for her 'masculine' writing style and also her 'masculine' appearance. Diarist Alice James found Eliot's fiction to be full of 'wisdom, humour, and the richest humanity' in 1889, but reported that she found her letters and journals 'a monument of ponderous dreariness' and criticised Eliot for her 'superlative solemnity.' '[S]he makes upon me the impression, morally and physically, of mildew, or some morbid growth – a fungus of a pendulous shape, or as of something damp to the touch,' she wrote.⁷⁹ Whilst living in England in 1894, American actress and author Elizabeth Robins denounced Eliot in her novel *George Mandeville's Husband*. When a character cites Eliot as proof of women's intellectual capabilities, her father responds:

Yes, yes, all women say George Eliot, and think the argument unanswerable. As if to instance one woman (who, by the way, was three parts men) did more than expose the poverty of their position [...] She was abnormal [...] She was a poor burdened creature, fitter to be pitied than blazoned abroad as example and excuse.

The daughter immediately concedes: 'George Eliot *looks* awful. Her picture frightens me!'⁸⁰ Eliot was a distorted mirror image which showed female writers their own limitations – a frightening image indeed.

This was a mirror image that the subsequent female authors examined in this thesis had in mind as they described women reading in their fiction. Whilst scholarship about these authors has often presented their attitudes towards Eliot as one solely of admiration or rejection (this is particularly true of Woolson and Richardson), on further examination we see that their relationships with Eliot reflect her divided status amongst female authors in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain and America. As my chapters on Woolson, Wharton and Richardson will show, their ambivalence about Eliot centres on her

⁷⁸ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M. O. W. Oliphant*. ed. Mrs. Harry Caghill (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1899), pp. 4-8.

⁷⁹ Leon Edel, ed., *The Diary of Alice James* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), pp. 40-1.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 109.

masculinisation in literary culture, and, more importantly, on Eliot's own ambivalence about female authorship as expressed through her representations of women reading in her fiction.

My focus in this thesis is how female writers articulate their artistic anxieties and aspirations through their configurations of the reading woman in their fiction. As a result, I have been less concerned with the more practical issue of money which surfaces, at times, in the representations of female readers examined in this study. Thanks to advances in printing and production methods, and reforms in education, all of which made literature cheaper and quicker to produce and disseminate for an ever growing number of readers, by the late nineteenth century authorship was a lucrative profession in Britain and America, and one which attracted many women because it allowed them to be financially independent. This is evoked in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), a novel which explores the contemporary anxiety that female authorship was tantamount to prostitution. In this narrative environment, for a female writer to be a successful, for her to survive as an artist, requires that she enters into the morally-dubious arena of financial and sexual exchange.⁸¹ Wharton's author figure Lily Bart refuses to do so and dies as a result at the close of her narrative. By the time we come to the portrait of Miriam Henderson in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-67), the question of a woman earning money through authorship is less fraught. Richardson's heroine joins many 'New Women' who supported themselves at the turn of the century through their writing, living independently just above the poverty line, and is celebrated for doing so. Unlike Lily, Miriam survives beyond the pages of her novel. Whilst I am aware of the discussions about authorship and money taking place in these and other texts I examine in this thesis, I have chosen not to address these and instead have focussed on the relationship between gender and artistic capability.⁸²

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will focus primarily on representations of female readers as well as the related figures of educated intellectuals, writers, and artists within the fiction of Eliot, Woolson, Wharton and Richardson. They will also look at the particular circumstances in which each of these authors wrote, and how personal factors affecting their sense of identity as artists surface in their configurations of the female reader. As well as examining fictional female readers, the latter three chapters of this thesis will

⁸¹ See Ruth Yeazell, 'The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart,' *ELH*, 59 (1992), 713-34, p. 721, and Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, esp. p. 103.

⁸² For discussions of the professionalisation of the female author and of financial issues pertaining to female authorship, see Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*; Amy Kaplan, 'Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship', *ELH*, 53 (1986), 433-57; Sally Mitchell, 'Careers for Girls: Writing Trash', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 25 (1993), 109-13; Nicola Diane Thompson, ed., *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

explore how Woolson, Wharton and Richardson responded to Eliot through their non-fiction writing, including letters, articles and reviews, in order to shed light on the similarities and discrepancies between their representations of the female reader and Eliot's, and more fundamentally, their ideas about female authorship.

Constance Fenimore Woolson, who is the subject of the third chapter, is typically known as a writer of 'local color' fiction, and was a popular and critical success over the course of her writing career. Of the three writers, Woolson was the most admiring of George Eliot and her fiction, and her relationship with Eliot is imperative to our understanding of her development as a writer. As my chapter on Woolson will demonstrate, revelations about Eliot's personal life that she heard about after her departure for Europe in 1879 had a devastating effect on her confidence as a literary artist, and consequently the anxieties about her vocation that informed her early writing come sharply to the fore in her later work. In her writing, she often brings to the surface the underlying ideas about women's relationship to literary authority that Eliot articulates through her fiction. Particularly in the latter part of her career, we often see her presenting female artists explicitly in her writing. Woolson launches an unflinching attack on the literary establishment, comprised, as she conceived it, of narrow-minded male intellectuals who were prejudiced against female writers. In a reductive and provocative version of the dynamic Eliot presents between the woman writer and the literary world, Woolson blames male critics for suppressing women's intellectual and artistic development. However, she is unable to portray an alternative for her female reader-artists, and we find that she uses these figures defensively in order to express her anxiety about gender-biased criticism of her writing. This emerges in the masochistic strains in her portraits of intellectuals and artists, women who are repeatedly diminished or destroyed by male critical verdicts in her fiction.

The fourth chapter focuses on Edith Wharton. Eliot was a touchstone for her literary development, a writer who served as a point of reference from which to define herself as a female author. This is especially true of a formative phase early in Wharton's career from 1900 to 1907, in which we often see direct echoes of Eliot's fiction in Wharton's writing, most notably *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and *Middlemarch* (1872). Reputed as the greatest woman writer by American literary critics, with all the limitations that this position continued to entail at the turn of the century, Eliot was a problematic figure for Wharton, who was torn between aligning herself with Eliot as a scientific and therefore 'masculine' writer and dismissing her as a stock, sentimental 'lady novelist.' Through her configurations of the female reader, we see Wharton experimenting with stances on authorship that Eliot

articulates in her fiction, including a defence of feminine literary engagement and Eliot's androgynous model. Ultimately, these attempts are undercut by Wharton's insistence on her identity as a scientific, masculine writer.

The final chapter of this thesis looks at Dorothy Richardson, a British modernist who saw realism as inherently patriarchal, but was unable to dismiss Eliot as a realist. Richardson scholars have yet to acknowledge the profound impact Eliot made on Richardson's writing, and my chapter seeks to elucidate this crucial link between the two authors. In this chapter, I will argue that Richardson's pioneering modernist aesthetic, famous for its 'stream of consciousness' technique, has its roots in Eliot's realist aesthetic. I will also be showing that Richardson's seminal thirteen-volume series *Pilgrimage* (1915-1967) is a career-long reworking of Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in which the bibliophile heroine does not drown at the close of her narrative, but becomes an author, thus fulfilling Eliot's search for a narrative in which 'the dark woman triumphs.' Unlike Woolson and Wharton, Richardson rejects Eliot's ideal of the androgynous ideal female reader-author. Through her appropriation of Eliot's figure of the female reader, she is able to articulate why Eliot's androgynous ideal failed and to offer a viable alternative, in which her female reader-author is feminine – but not in the sense that Eliot uses the term. Richardson's success is tied up in her radical modernist approach, which allows her to separate her thinking about authorship from the gendered categories that underpinned Eliot's representations of female readers.

Chapter Two: George Eliot (1819-1880) and the Moral Justifications of Female Authorship

I shall carry to my grave the mental diseases with which [novels and romances] have contaminated me. When I was quite a little child I could not be satisfied with the things around me; I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions that I might be left to my own musings and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress. Conceive what a character novels would give to these Utopias. [...] I made use of the materials they supplied for building my castles in the air [...] men and women are but children of a larger growth; they are still imitative beings. We cannot, at least those who read to any purpose at all [...] help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds. We hardly wish to lay claim to such elasticity as retains no impress. We are active beings too. We are each one of the *Dramatis personæ* in some play on the stage of life – hence our actions have their share in the effects of our reading.

— Mary Ann Evans to Maria Lewis, 16th [March 1839] ¹

Written at the age of nineteen, Mary Ann Evans's letter to her former teacher and fellow evangelist encapsulates nineteenth-century anxieties about the woman reader. In this account, the female reader becomes a conduit to the messages in the text, and the reading of novels and romances is a morally and socially hazardous activity. Literature displaces all social ties, all social authority: the little girl rejects companionship in favour of her 'own musings,' wherein her wants and desires become central, and she is promoted from a subsidiary character – a fitting metaphor for women's perceived social role – to 'chief actress.' If, as Evans claims at the end of the excerpt, 'our actions have their share in the effects of our reading,' there is a risk that the female reader might act out fictional transgressive scenarios in her own life. Thus, in reading novels and romances, material which Evans characterises as unrealistic and narcissistically indulgent, the woman reader is corrupted, or 'contaminated.'

It is significant that, even at this young age, Evans believed that the reader was a conduit to the messages in their reading. The psychological model evoked at the end of this excerpt, in which the reader is a palimpsest, written over and over through repeated exposure to texts, is one that arises throughout Eliot's fiction and one which I will be exploring in this chapter. What is also interesting about this letter is how the effects of reading are described in terms of artistic creativity. In this account, the female reader's 'contamination' manifests itself in the creative scenarios into which she inserts herself, notably as an 'actress.' Like the spoilt heroine of Eliot's final novel, Gwendolen Harleth, who reads 'uncontrollab[ly]' and repeatedly writes herself into dramatic scenarios where she features as the heroine – Hermione in the *Winter's Tale* tableau, a romantic heroine who scorns Grandcourt's advances, an opera singer, a striking gambler, an actress and a huntress – Evans describes

¹ Gordon S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*. Vol. I, pp. 22-3.

how the feminine reading of feminine material inspires feminine artistry – a narcissistic, antisocial form of creativity, with no foundation in reality, and which has little artistic worth.

The degree to which Mary Ann Evans was exaggerating for the benefit of her friend Maria Lewis, who was probably the most important influence in her life at the time, is difficult to ascertain. As this chapter will demonstrate however, this model of reading, along with the stereotypes of female reading and authorship on which it is based, continued to inform Eliot's thinking about reading and authorship throughout her writing career. This chapter will trace how these ideas evolved in Eliot's thinking, and how, in spite of her efforts to undermine them, they came to be manifested in her fictional representations of women reading. Alongside Eliot's attempts to reinforce the social, moral and artistic value of female reading, this chapter will show how her reader-authors undergo transformations over the course of their narratives which reinforce the opposition between femininity and creativity established in patriarchal literary criticism. These characters revert to conventional forms of femininity in which their intellectual identity is compromised and are dubbed moral as a result of that change, or else they are punished for their failure to relinquish their intellect and are presented as threats to their communities. I will highlight how in some instances, female readers who seek knowledge traditionally reserved for male students are rewarded, whereas in others, masculine ambition is belittled and the narrative reinforces that the female reader cannot transcend her inferior, feminine way of thinking. I will also show how some of Eliot's androgynous female reader-authors contradict negative stereotypes about female literary engagement, whilst others quite clearly endorse them. This chapter asks how the instability of Eliot's representations of female reading affects our experience of reading her works, and what these instabilities tell us about Eliot's attitudes towards, and difficulties with, the concept of female authorship. In this way, we may gauge where Eliot is placed within the tradition of women's writing about the anxiety of female authorship, and this discussion will form the foundation of later chapters where I trace subsequent authors' responses to her models of female reading.

Eliot's preoccupation with contemporary stereotypes of female reading and authorship can be traced back to the climate in which she launched herself onto the literary scene as a writer of fiction. As we saw in Chapter One, the female author became increasingly visible in Victorian discourse in the mid-nineteenth century.² The deaths of Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), and Mary Russell Mitford

² Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity', p. 146.

(1787-1855) in this decade prompted retrospective articles on these women's contributions to literary history and the female literary tradition.³ Discussions of the female author were also prompted by significant works exploring women's social and artistic roles which were published in this decade, most notably Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).⁴

For many commentators, the prominent issue of female authorship was conflated with the question of what place women should hold in contemporary social and political life.⁵ Therefore, along with a variety of other techniques used to diminish female literary authority, they responded to the increased visibility of women writers by insisting that female authorship was artistically inferior, and socially and morally dangerous. The categories that female writers were subject to in these branches of mid-nineteenth-century criticism have been well-established by feminist scholars, so I will provide only an overview here. Three of the most common epithets for female authors were 'feminine,' 'imitative' and 'immodest.' 'Feminine' authors, like Charlotte M. Yonge, wrote within the prescribed bounds of female experience, but at the same time, they were criticised for the narrow scope of their works and immediately relegated to a lower echelon of artistic achievement than their male counterparts.⁶ Women authors who crossed the boundaries of prescribed female experience were deemed 'immodest' or accused of 'imitating' male writers, and their transgressive writing was dubbed morally and socially questionable, as well as artistically inferior.⁷ Charlotte Brontë was criticised on all three counts: if *Jane Eyre* was the production of a woman, it was 'a woman unsexed.'⁸ Frequently, Brontë's writing was described as 'strong,' 'vigorous,' 'powerful,' and above all 'coarse,' and 'unladylike,'⁹ all qualities which caused her to '[step] out of her sex – without elevating herself above it.'¹⁰

Like female authorship, female reading was often considered to be socially and morally dangerous at this time. The sensation novel was becoming increasingly popular during the early years of Eliot's career, and as we saw in Chapter One, it was feared that

³ Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity', p. 146.

⁴ Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity', p. 145.

⁵ Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity', p. 146.

⁶ For a discussion of Yonge's reception, see Thompson, esp. pp. 93-4.

⁷ Easley, 'Authorship, Gender and Identity', p. 147.

⁸ Gordon, p. 188.

⁹ Sturrock, p. 118.

¹⁰ G. H. Lewes, 'Curren Bell's "Shirley"', *The Living Age*, 24 (March 16 1850), 481-9, pp. 489. Bizarrely, Lewes took an entirely different approach to *Jane Eyre*, which he deemed to be '[d]ecidedly the best novel of the season' in his 1848 review, praising its artistic skill and realism – attributes traditionally deemed "masculine." See G. H. Lewes, 'Review of *Jane Eyre*', *Westminster Review*, 48 (Jan. 1848), 581-84.

these novels would prompt impressionable female readers to imitate the extra-marital affairs, bigamy and violent crime that typically featured in the genre. Other commentators saw women's intellectual study as a source of disquiet. In his *Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (1861), for instance, Herbert Spencer, with whom Eliot was well-acquainted, observed that '[i]n the pale, angular, flat-chested young ladies, so abundant in London drawing-rooms, we see the effect of merciless [mental] application,' a 'physical degeneracy' resulting from the 'sacrifice' of 'the body to the mind' through study. A woman permitted such mental exertions, he warned, was 'not unfrequently' 'doom[ed] to celibacy,' thereby denying her proper, natural social and biological function.¹¹

Reaching a point in her life where she wanted to write novels herself in the late 1850s, Eliot was faced with several challenges: how could she justify her authorship as a woman, morally, socially and artistically? How could she write in a way that would not corrupt or de-sex her readers? These are questions she was considering in the years leading up to the publication of her first work of fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,' in 1857. Three of her essays, 'Women in France' (1854), 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft' (1855) and 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856) deal explicitly with female authorship and were written just prior to the publication of her short story. These essays suggest that she was contemplating these questions, and trying to carve out a space for herself as a female literary artist within an environment that devalued female literary art. Ultimately, what we find is that Eliot challenges these ideas, but only in part, presenting herself and a select few female authors as exceptions to the rule that women writers produce artistically inferior, morally suspect and socially valueless fiction.

Eliot's essays on female authors have long held a controversial place in the study of Victorian women's literature. Feminist critics have been unable to agree as to whether these essays constitute an attempt to 'formulate a higher critical standard for women's writing,' and even, to borrow from Hilary Fraser and Judith Johnston, 'a call to arms,' or whether they are an 'anti-feminist diatribe against women's novels.'¹² The simple answer to this is that the essays were written with contradictory aims and needs in mind. Rather than expressing a definitive stance on the bias against women in patriarchal literary criticism, these essays expose how Eliot was unsure about how to reconcile herself with the gender bias in patriarchal literary criticism as she prepared to enter the literary world as a writer of fiction –

¹¹ Spencer, pp. 278-81.

¹² Hilary Fraser and Judith Johnston, 'The Professionalization of Women's Writing: Extending the Canon', in *Women and Literature in Britain: 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 231; Easley, *First Person Anonymous*, p. 148n1.

a trend which, as we will see later in the chapter, continued in her fiction. In these essays, Eliot is forming a 'personal credo of what female fiction ought to be' which is 'directed as much to herself as to any other woman writer.'¹³

On the one hand, as scholars have recognised, these essays are designed to argue for women's capacity to equal their male counterparts intellectually, and to do so in a socially productive, morally healthy way. However, there are numerous points where Eliot perceptibly draws back from her feminist standpoint and undercuts her argument, couching her criticisms in the vituperative rhetoric used by contemporary commentators and reaffirming the stereotypes she sought to challenge.¹⁴

In 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft,' for example, Eliot asserts the moral and social value of female authorship. She identifies the limiting of women's intellectual development, which encompasses the act of authorship, as a social evil which places both women and men in a 'state of subjection.'¹⁵ However, Eliot later contradicts this idea that female authorship is a moral enterprise which benefits society as a whole. In 'Silly Novels,' Eliot presents female authorship as, for the majority, a fanciful, narcissistic enterprise, a combined product of arrogance and ignorance with little social, moral or artistic worth. In an echo of Robert Southey, Eliot charges women with taking up the pen purely for '[t]he foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print.'¹⁶

On occasions, Eliot takes an essentialist view of authorship and asserts the artistic value of the 'feminine' elements in women's literature, and by extension, the artistic value of female authorship (as we will see later in the chapter, Eliot also adopts this technique in her representation of female readers in her fiction). 'Women in France,' published in 1854, celebrates the work of French female authors as equal but distinct from those of men. The artistic success of French female authors, Eliot claims, is grounded in their refusal to '[affect] manly views or [suppress] womanly ones,' and in this way, Eliot rejects the gendered hierarchy which disdained so-called feminine literary characteristics.¹⁷ Similarly, in 'Silly Novels,' she makes the claim that women's literature has 'a precious speciality' in being created by the female mind, and '[lies] quite apart from masculine aptitudes and

¹³ Susan Rowland Tush, *George Eliot and the Conventions of Popular Women's Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 4.

¹⁴ Easley, *First Person Anonymous*, p. 118.

¹⁵ George Eliot, 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft', in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 333, 336.

¹⁶ Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 145, 149, 161.

¹⁷ Eliot, 'Women in France: Madame de Sablé', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 8-9.

experience.’¹⁸ Equally, however, Eliot evokes contemporary stereotypes of female writing used to denigrate female authorship in her essentialist arguments. The problem with English women’s literature, Eliot argues in ‘Women in France,’ is that unlike their French counterparts, they try to write as men, and so ‘when not a feeble imitation’ of male writers, their works ‘are usually an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire.’¹⁹ Whilst championing women’s writing in France, Eliot criticises English women’s writing for being imitative.

Elsewhere, Eliot asserts that the gender of the writer is irrelevant. Quoting Margaret Fuller, Eliot writes: ‘If you ask me what offices they (women) may fill, I reply – any. I do not care what case you put [...] I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office [...] for masculine pursuits.’²⁰ In ‘Silly Novels,’ Eliot explicitly affirms that ‘[f]iction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men.’ Yet in the same essay, Eliot insists that the majority of female authors, described as ‘average,’ are not up to standard and should leave authorship to the minority – presumably including Eliot herself – who can equal their male counterparts.

As several critics have suggested, Eliot’s position in ‘Silly Novels’ may be understood as a call to women to empower themselves by measuring their literary efforts according to more rigorous standards used for male authors.²¹ Nonetheless, Eliot’s ambivalence over female authorship remains clear in her contradictory claims as to who is to blame for poor standards of female writing. She laments that ‘when a woman’s talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; and if she ever reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to freezing point.’ She points to society as a ‘culpable entity’ in this absurd logic,²² and does so again when she identifies poor standards of female education as a determining factor in their literary output. However, she is quick to emphasise that for the most part it is the women themselves who are to blame for producing literature of such poor quality, and for hindering the careers of superior female writers who possess the talent and intelligence they do not.²³ Alexis Easley’s reading of the essay highlights how Eliot suggests

¹⁸ Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, in *Selected Essays*, p. 162.

¹⁹ Eliot, ‘Women in France: Madame de Sablé’, in *Selected Essays*, p. 8.

²⁰ Eliot, ‘Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft’, in *Selected Essays*, p. 336.

²¹ See Fraser and Johnston, p. 231; Kimberly J. Stern, ‘A Common Fund: George Eliot and the Gender Politics of Criticism’, *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, 30 (2008), 45–63, p. 57; see also Catherine A. Judd, ‘Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England’, in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 254.

²² Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, in *Selected Essays*, pp. 162–3.

²³ Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, in *Selected Essays*, pp. 154, 155, 162.

to her readers that 'self-cultivation brings an equality that is beyond conventional gender categories. She implies that successful authorship is less a matter of gender than of self-culture.'²⁴ Presumably then, women have the capacity to transcend the natural limits of their gender if they work hard enough.

Preparing to enter the literary marketplace as a writer of fiction, Eliot was clearly struggling with patriarchal evaluations of female authorship. She was anxious to champion and defend the artistic, social and moral value of female authorship, yet she felt unable to dismiss the idea that women's fiction was substandard in all these respects. In her essays, Eliot announces herself as an exception to the rule who will combine masculine and feminine qualities to create a superior form of literary art.

We should bear in mind that Eliot is constructing a public literary persona in these essays; and this is why her model of realism, in which she covertly defines the ideal author, is more revealing and complex than her explicit dealings with the issue of female authorship. In this model, Eliot continues to justify her writing in response to claims that female authorship was morally and socially redundant, and artistically inferior. This model also sets up the link between reading and authorship that persists throughout her fiction. Eliot insists that her fiction will benefit the reader morally and socially, specifically by developing their empathy.²⁵ For Eliot, empathy is the 'raw material of moral sentiment' and thus the cornerstone of social progress, a necessary means by which her readers might be shaped into moral citizens.²⁶ However, as we will see, the model is more complex and far-reaching than this in terms of its gender politics and what it has to say about the relationship of the female artist to patriarchal literary authority.

Let us look first at what Eliot's realist aesthetic purports to do. Eliot outlines her realist aesthetic in her essay 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856) and in chapter seventeen of her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859). Moral citizens, writes Eliot, should 'tolerate, pity, and love' the people they encounter in everyday life.²⁷ The love she speaks of stems

²⁴ Easley, *First Person Anonymous*, p. 119.

²⁵ For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to 'empathy' throughout this chapter. Whilst 'empathy' was not introduced into the English language until 1909, it better articulates what is happening in Eliot's model of reading than the historically accurate term 'sympathy' which she and her contemporaries used. One need not feel what others feel in order to sympathise with them, whereas empathy 'collapses the boundary between subject and object,' allowing the individual to enter into another's feelings. As my exploration of Eliot's realist aesthetic will show, this 'fusion' of self and other is integral to her model of reading and the gender politics latent in that model. See D. Rae Greiner, 'Thinking of Me Thinking of You: Sympathy Versus Empathy in the Realist Novel', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political, and Cultural Studies*, 53 (2011), 417-26, esp. pp. 417-9.

²⁶ Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', in *Selected Essays*, p. 110.

²⁷ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 160.

from a recognition of inner beauty, that is, of innate moral goodness. If moral and social progress are dependent upon our love for our fellow man, it follows that the ‘greatest benefit’ an artist may bestow upon us is ‘the extension of our sympathies,’ a feat which may be achieved through honest portrayals of the ‘commonplace’ mortals we encounter in everyday life.²⁸ Realism, in which ‘ordinary’ people are depicted exactly as they are, therefore becomes a moral choice on the part of the artist, for in selecting these commonplace mortals as an appropriate artistic subject, the realist artist implicitly recognises their inner beauty, and encourages their audience to do so as well. ‘It is more needful,’ writes Eliot, ‘that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me [...] than at the deeds of [the idealised] heroes [of non-realist fiction] whom I shall never know except by hearsay.’²⁹ By extension, then, there is a moral and social ‘need’ for realism; the reading and writing of realist fiction is justified as a humanistic venture integral to the cementing of bonds between the individual and their community.

This process involves making the unfamiliar familiar. According to Eliot, by reading the realist novel we undergo a psychological process whereby the way we relate to others is altered. Realism encourages us to look beyond superficial standards of judgement such as those adopted in idealistic art, and to see that the commonplace man is a subjective, flawed, but inherently good human being, just like us, the reader, and thus deserving of our compassion. The woman scraping carrots in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede* is just as worthy of literary attention, just as worthy of being loved as the conventional beauties and glorified heroes of romantic fiction. In short, by reading about ordinary mortals, we learn to empathise with and relate to people we might otherwise have prejudged and from whom we might have distanced ourselves. In this way, the reading process helps to mould us into more caring, morally grounded citizens.

Eliot’s fiction bears out this model, thereby justifying itself: it is by no coincidence that the moral centres of her novels are characters who do a great deal of reading. However, the moral model of reading and authorship put forward in Eliot’s defence of realism does not provide a complete account of how reading operates in Eliot’s fiction. In fact, Eliot’s moral agenda obscures the wider social and artistic implications of her fictional representations of reading.

²⁸ Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, in *Selected Essays*, p. 110; Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 162.

²⁹ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 162-3.

These implications become clear when we examine Eliot's moral model of reading in the light of contemporary psychological theory, which argues that reading makes the reader more aware of how they relate to other people and their wider environment. These psychological models highlight the internalised dialogue between the individual and society taking place during the reading process, a dialogue which may also be read in the context of the reader or author with artistic authorities. These theories highlight that for Eliot, the reading process – as presented both in her defence of realism and in her fiction – is a platform on which to debate how women should relate to patriarchal social and artistic authorities.

In his essay on 'George Eliot's Art' (1881), James Sully claims that Eliot provides the reader with a psychological mirror in which their unconscious thought processes are made conscious through explicit representation in the text. Eliot presents psychological portraits in which the 'intertwining twigs' of the reader's thought processes are 'untwined, and each separate growth referred to its proper origin,'³⁰ that is, its psychological root.³¹ In other words, Eliot's fiction makes explicit the links between unconscious and conscious thought and action, and – as he goes on to emphasise – between the psychology of the individual and their social environment: 'A personality is only a concrete living whole when we attach it by a net-work of organic filaments to its particular environment, physical and social,' writes Sully. 'Our author is a moral teacher in the sense that she holds the mirror up to nature in such a way as to disclose to view the finer threads which bind together the inner and the outer life, the early and the late experience, the individual and the common lot.'³²

In Sully's reading of the psychological impact of Eliot's realism, the reader is not only prompted to acknowledge the innate moral goodness of their fellow man, but the psychological phenomena, made explicit in Eliot's psychologically detailed characterisations, which are common to all humans and which bind us as a species. This includes how we relate to others. The result is an increased capacity for empathy (Eliot's works 'deepen, expand, and vivify our social feeling'³³) but also a more objective understanding of the reader's relationship with wider society, and how their identity is shaped by certain social factors. These include ideas about class, race, and, most pertinently for this thesis, gender. As a character's identity is explored in relation to an array of social models or 'outer li[ves]' as Sully puts it, so we see our own identities reflected in relation to a range of social factors.

³⁰ James Sully, 'George Eliot's Art', *Mind*, 6 (Jul. 1881), 378-94, p. 389.

³¹ For a more in depth discussion of Sully's psychological theories about the impact of reading Eliot's fiction, see Vanessa L. Ryan, 'Reading the Mind: From George Eliot's Fiction to James Sully's Psychology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70 (2009), 615-35, esp. p. 632.

³² Sully, pp. 382, 390.

³³ Sully, p. 393.

According to Sully's argument, then, Eliot's fiction not only develops our understanding of others, but our understanding of ourselves as 'a unit in a Social Organism.'³⁴ This idea is evoked repeatedly by G. H. Lewes in his psychological series, written whilst he was living with Eliot, *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-1879). Though the idea of the mind as an organism is not evoked with direct reference to the reading process, Lewes's materialist ideas about psychological formation implicitly argue that reading is a two-way process, with the text shaping the ideas of the reader, and the psychology of the reader in turn modifying the ideas they receive from the text:

All mental manifestations are simply the resultants of the conditions external and internal [...] The function of an organ is as rigorously determined by the stimulus which excites it as by the structure which is excited [...] It is the same with what may be called the mental organism. Here also every phenomenon is the product of two factors external and internal, impersonal and personal, objective and subjective [...] An organism lives only in relation to its medium. What Growth is, in the physical sense, that is Experience in the psychical sense, namely, *organic registration of assimilated material*. [...] Materials are incessantly absorbed from without, and are there elaborated, made fit for assimilation.³⁵

Here, the thought processes of the individual are the product of a dialogue between the mind and its social 'medium.' In this model, experience is tantamount to an external stimulus from which ideas may be assimilated by the brain, thus shaping the individual's thought-processes. Equally (just as reader-response theory would later posit), certain ideas may be modified or rejected according to the structure of the mind.³⁶ The state of the mind, and whether it is open to new ideas, is dependent on past experience, or stimuli, which have in turn shaped the workings of the brain. Later in this volume, Lewes describes how moral instincts are accrued through 'previous habits of acting rightly,' suggesting that moral decision making, and by extension, any kind of response to a stimulus, is in part determined by 'physiological channels established in the mind by previous action.'³⁷ In other volumes of *Problems*, Lewes also talks of mental 'residua,' that is, modifications imprinted on our thinking by hereditary information or past experience – an example of the latter which is the reading of a text.

Let us take reading as a particular example of a mental stimulus. Reading is in itself a form of vicarious social experience, and constitutes a social 'medium.' Any given text

³⁴ G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: The Foundations of a Creed*. 5 vols. Vol. I (London: Trübner & Co., 1874), p. 109.

³⁵ Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: The Foundations of a Creed*, Vol I, pp. 128, 115, 118-9.

³⁶ See Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: The Foundations of a Creed*, p. 120 and *Problems of Life and Mind: Mind as Function of the Organism*, 5 vols. Vols. I and V (London: Trübner & Co., 1879), p. 107.

³⁷ Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: The Foundations of a Creed*, Vol. I, p. 306; see also Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 108.

presents a model of social relations to the reader, and has the potential to configure the relationship of individuals to social ideas and authorities in limitless ways. To read is to engage with these models, and to make them part of the social 'medium' surrounding the mind. Ultimately, then, in this psychological model, to read is to open up one's mind to be imprinted by the messages in the text.

This would seem to affirm the ideas that Eliot held about reading in the letter quoted at the start of the chapter. In reading, we cannot 'help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds' and thus 'our actions have their share in the effects of our reading.'³⁸ However, Lewes's model also presents the possibility of a moral and socially beneficial mode of reading, a disciplined model in which texts are carefully chosen for their content – like, for example, the realist works Eliot praises in her defence of realism. Eliot's representations of reading perform a meta-narrative function: on a superficial level, Eliot is showing us how to read her novels, indicating that she wishes us to draw moral sustenance from our reading; but at the same time, she is showing us how to relate to social and artistic authorities and dominant cultural ideas, and as a part of that, how the female author should relate to literary authorities.

In Eliot's fictional representations of reading, the relationship between the female author and literary authority is explored according to a continuum ranging from passive to active reading. Broadly speaking, active, or resistant, reading is a kind of self-creation, a process in which the social ideas encoded within the text – specifically about woman's proper social identity – are questioned by the reader. This pole is akin to authorship as it is fundamentally a creative response, where the reader asserts her own identity and does not allow herself to be defined by her reading, or more fundamentally, by the patriarchal ideas encoded in the text by the author. They are also careful in their reading choices, thereby escaping the 'imprint' of texts which are biased against women. By contrast, the passive reader, who chooses her reading material on the basis of pleasure rather than considering the ideas encoded in the text, is socially hazardous, consuming the ideas of her reading unthinkingly and perpetuating them. She conforms to dominant ideas about women's intellectual capabilities, affirming that 'female nature, mental as well as physical, is essentially receptive and not creative,' and that women are not capable of writing literature to the same standard as their male counterparts.³⁹

³⁸ Letter to Maria Lewis, [March 16] 1839, in Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol I, p. 23.

³⁹ 'Female Intellect', pp. 336-7.

Whilst it is clear that Eliot intended to champion the androgynous female reader-author and criticise misogynistic attitudes towards female literary artists, she is not always consistent on this point. The stereotypes employed in certain branches of literary criticism often feature alongside Eliot's ideal female reader-authors. Moreover, in every case Eliot undercuts her own attempts to conceive of her androgynous ideal, and so ultimately her fiction seems to reinforce women's inability to transcend the perceived limits of their biology. Eliot's fictional representations of women reading, then, do not present a clear model of how women should relate to patriarchal social and artistic authorities.

We recall that Eliot's definition of moral literature is tied to issues of indiscriminate love and equality. Like the woman scraping carrots, we must cherish women – and women's literary engagement – as much as men, and their reading and writing. The inconsistencies in Eliot's attitudes to women's reading practises therefore place a question mark over her commitment to gender equality for female authors. It is not merely the case that morality masks the gender politics in Eliot's fiction, but rather that her ideas about gender and authorship disrupt her moral model.

I begin my examination of representations of reading within Eliot's fiction by substantiating the claim Eliot puts forward in her fiction that to read passively is socially to disempower oneself. We find the clearest illustration of this in Eliot's first full-length work, *Adam Bede*. Here, Eliot shows us that – paradoxically – fiction is a way of understanding one's social and ideological climate and thus of anchoring oneself in the social real, and, particularly for women, a vital basis on which to understand and reject the limited and contradictory roles they are expected to perform within society and the literary art world. Reading is constructed in *Adam Bede* as a symbolic writing process wherein readers may write their own identities, and write themselves out of the limited, conflicted and, in this case, immoral roles offered to them within a patriarchal social system.

Reading and Social Empowerment in Eliot's Fiction

The lack of reading undertaken by Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne is pivotal to the events that transpire in *Adam Bede*. Central to Eliot's novel is the idea that fiction is a tool that equips readers to anticipate the consequences of their actions and its effects on others; without this prior knowledge, Eliot's characters unwittingly play out roles designated for them by patriarchal ideology. In Eliot's narrative, responsibility for an illicit affair which results in the death of an illegitimate child is laid at the door of an ignorant woman of low class, a woman who unwittingly allows herself to become a disposable tool for male pleasure.

Whereas Arthur, a young squire, is forgiven for seducing Hetty and allowed to re-enter the Hayslope community, Hetty is rejected by it and dies in a penal colony, a casualty of the social system which created her – a fate which she might have avoided, Eliot suggests, if she had read novels.

The most pivotal work featured in the narrative world of *Adam Bede* is John Moore's *Zeluco* (1789),⁴⁰ a morality tale which warns of the consequences of yielding to passion, and one which Arthur Donnithorne neglects to read. *Zeluco*, a nobleman who is not naturally cruel, seduces, neglects and duels his way through the narrative, strangling his own child in a fit of passion in the closing chapters.⁴¹ This novel is a deliberate choice by Eliot, as the narrative mirrors the course Arthur himself will soon undertake. Like Moore's protagonist, Arthur, a nobleman with a naturally 'loving nature,' is cast as the heartless seducer whose actions result in the death of his own child.⁴² Arthur never quite gets round to reading *Zeluco*: preoccupied with thoughts of Hetty, the novel gets thrown into a corner of the Hermitage and is never referred to again. 'He was ready to pitch everything else – no matter where – for the sake of surrendering himself to this delicious feeling which had just disclosed itself [...] what would come of it?' he wonders (121). The answer lies in the book he has just discarded. The implication is that if Arthur had read the novel, he would have been presented with the potential consequences of his actions, and would have had the opportunity to choose not to act on his attraction to Hetty. As discussed in Chapter One, reading provides the individual with vicarious experiences of unfamiliar and difficult situations. Forewarned, the reader is better equipped to make the right choices in order to avoid finding themselves in circumstances similar to those detailed in their reading. Failing to read *Zeluco*, Arthur is denied the opportunity to see himself and his desires mirrored in Moore's villain, and so for him, the consequences of yielding to passion go only so far as making Hetty 'miserable' when he leaves Hayslope in a few weeks (121). How different *Adam Bede* might have been had Arthur read *Zeluco*!

As a woman of low-class, Hetty's exposure to literature is meagre compared to Arthur's as we might expect, and for her, this lack of reading means her expectations of their affair have little grounding in the social real. Hetty, we are told, 'had never read a novel [...] how then could she find a shape for her expectations?' (123). This question goes to the heart

⁴⁰ The impact of Arthur's failure to read *Zeluco* is discussed in detail in Debra Gettelman, 'Reading Ahead in George Eliot', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 39 (2005), 25-47, p. 42.

⁴¹ See Jerome Thale, 'Adam Bede: Arthur Donnithorne and *Zeluco*', *Modern Language Notes*, 70 (1955), 263-65, p. 264.

⁴² Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 280.

of the narrative; without the vicarious experience with which reading might have provided her, on a superficial level Hetty has no way to predict what will happen during their meeting, nor, on a more significant one, any way to predict that acting on physical desires will have such drastic consequences. With only her limited 'little history of her own pleasures and pains' to draw upon, her expectations remain 'formless' and 'childish' (331, 123, 331). Early in the novel, she sees her relations with Arthur as a means to becoming a lady of luxury, oblivious to the idea that Arthur might not intend marriage and that her class would obstruct their union, and later, as she seeks him during her pregnancy, she is capable of no 'more definite idea of her probable future than that Arthur would take care of her somehow, and shelter her from anger and scorn' (333-4). Should Hetty have read works of fiction, Eliot hints, she would have been provided with a more objective and informed understanding of her social status, and thus would have been better equipped to understand the risks involved in her affair with Arthur. As it is, she has no understanding of the position she holds in her community, nor the pitfalls of that position. The accomplishment for which Hetty is universally praised in Hayslope is her beauty. Never having empathised with women like Dinah who ascribe to an entirely different model of femininity – an empathy which would have been developed through reading – she has no sense of how limiting the role of the beautiful woman is and embraces it blindly. As Rachel Bowlby puts it, without fiction, without a 'template with which to understand [her] situation,' '[a woman] has no story, or else one hurtles towards 'a woman's destiny,' or whatever destiny it may be, in blindness and ignorance.'⁴³

According to Eliot's model, if failing to read is to accept dominant interpretations of one's identity on the basis of one's gender, then to engage with literature is socially empowering, allowing women to assert an independent identity – in both a social and artistic context – beyond the confines of patriarchal ideology.

From this point in her writing career, Eliot began to develop her defence of women's authorship by incorporating the gendered categories of reading and writing that were prevalent in some branches of literary criticism into her portraits of female readers. In the works that follow *Adam Bede*, the issue is no longer whether the individual reads or not, but how and what they read: whether they engage with masculine or feminine texts. In mid-nineteenth-century criticism, the masculine text was typically valued over the feminine, a hierarchy that Eliot was anxious to challenge. One way in which she challenges this hierarchy

⁴³ Rachel Bowlby, 'Hetty Had Never Read a Novel': *Adam Bede* and Realism', *George Eliot Review*, 41 (2010), 16-29, pp. 22-3.

is to demonstrate through her portraits of female readers of romance, the feminine genre, that feminine fiction is not simply socially and morally useful, but imperative.

The Social and Moral Value of Reading the Feminine Romance

In her representations of women reading romances, Eliot does not refute the fact that romance offers escape and entertainment, but emphasises the psychological importance of these elements. She takes the idea that feminine works are designed to evoke a purely emotional, rather than intellectual, response, and argues that the feelings inspired by romance are crucial to the individual's development of empathy, and, particularly for women, provide a vital imaginative outlet for individuals whose intellectual development is otherwise stifled by the narrow values of their culture. In this way, she constructs the reading of the feminine romance as a social and moral necessity.

The presentation of romance reading as an important outlet for women who are denied access to a range of masculine reading material and social roles allows Eliot to critique the limiting concepts of the female mind which influenced commentators' attitudes towards female writers. Nowhere is this stated more strongly than in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). The opening books in particular protest openly against the traditional assumption that an academic education is best suited to the male brain, and by contrast, appropriate reading for women should consist primarily of the 'pretty books' which would instruct the female reader in morals and feeling, but, as befitted a brain incapable of great intellectual feats, mostly to instruct and entertain.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, while Maggie is denied the intellectual education she yearns for, she finds invaluable solace in the romances she is permitted to read. These novels serve as an imaginative and emotional outlet, a source of comfort when her home life becomes fraught; she departs on 'wild romances of flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary: she would go to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her' (287). Rather than a form of narcissistic indulgence or facile entertainment, the 'romances of flight' are borne of intellectual frustration.

Conversely, romances also provide Maggie with alternate models of femininity with which she identifies; not the scandalous women that commentators feared impressionable female readers would imitate, but in Maggie's case, women with a degree of intellectual freedom. Referring Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815), for instance, Maggie compares

⁴⁴ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 18. Further citations in this chapter will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

herself to its heroine Lucy Bertram, suggesting that if she had been taught book-keeping like Lucy, she might teach Tom and help him make his way in the world (234). If Maggie cannot find satisfaction in the life set out for her by her community, she can have vicarious experience of an existence that would fulfil her intellectual needs through her reading.

Freed from the constraints of 'the supposed social real,' romances allowed readers to 'inhabit' their 'provocative landscape[s]' and 'live its stories mentally.'⁴⁵ Diane Elam proposes that

[i]f the representation of female desire is incommensurable with the objective cultural field that is the purview of realism, then it is as readers of romance that Eliot's heroines explore a space beyond that of their author's own overt representational strategies. As readers of romance, Eliot's women produce a counterplot to patriarchal law.⁴⁶

This argument places the romantic elements in Eliot's fiction in an interesting light. As several commentators have noted, melodramatic elements abound in Eliot's fiction, and often we find the purported focus on the repetitive, unexceptional lives as set out in her realist aesthetic, and the objective, omniscient narrative voice she adopts, to be ill-fitting with these sensational elements.⁴⁷ So the romance novel and the feminine mode of literary engagement it is associated with are validated within the world of the text, through their benefit to Maggie, but also more subtly through Eliot's authorship. If women were constrained in their existence in the real – that is, both in their own lives and in their representation within the dominant literary form, realism – romance provided a unique space where women readers and writers might 'exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations' vicariously, thus temporarily circumventing patriarchal law. This accounts for why Eliot eschews the stereotype of the female romance reader, as exemplified by Flaubert's Emma Bovary, and chooses to present characters like level-headed Mary Garth, a woman who copes with her hardships by losing herself in romance novels, reading Walter Scott in *Middlemarch*.

In the criticism of the era, female sexuality was central to anxieties about the female romance reader. Eliot addresses this directly in *Felix Holt* (1866), in a scene where the

⁴⁵ Kaplan, 'The Thorn Birds: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity', pp. 123-4.

⁴⁶ Elam, p. 127.

⁴⁷ In her discussion of chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*, Josephine McDonagh suggests that 'George Eliot's commitment to this kind of emotional restraint in her account of realism [...] seems forced and in the end, disingenuous; it is perhaps a repression, or burial, of a narrative preference for the less respectable modes of melodrama and romance.' See Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 148-9.

discovery of Esther Lyon's volume of Byron's poems is presented as a 'violent sexual exposure'.⁴⁸

down went the blue-frilled work-basket, flying open, and dispersing on the floor reels, thimble, muslin work, a small sealed bottle of attar of rose, and something heavier than these – a duodecimo volume which fell close to [Felix] [...] 'Byron's Poems!' he said, in a tone of disgust [...] '“The Dream” – he'd better have been asleep and snoring. What! do you stuff your memory with Byron, Miss Lyon?'⁴⁹

The effects of brain-stuffing, a term usually applied to over-study but also frequently to overindulging in forms of literature deemed inferior by literary commentators, was seen to be a gradual reversal of the mind-body hierarchy in which reason (the mind) was superseded by psychic sensations which bypassed the thought-processes and worked directly on the body.⁵⁰ Contemporary commentators feared that excessive romance reading would prompt female readers to unthinkingly imitate the romantic exploits detailed in the books, thus unleashing their dormant monstrous sexuality and causing them to disregard social laws governing female behaviour.⁵¹

In this context, the choice of Byron is pointed. Byron's poetry is replete with unconventional treatment of female sexuality: he writes of harems, incest, 'fast' women and women whose passivity is eroticised. Byron himself was notorious for having had an incestuous affair with his half-sister and was alleged to have been bisexual.⁵² 'The Dream' tells a tale of quasi-incestuous unrequited love for another man's wife. Appropriate to the idea of the inverted mind-body hierarchy, the poem asserts that the world of sleep and dreams is no less real than the waking world.⁵³ If we understand this unconscious world as being the realm of repressed emotion and sexuality, or a space where unacceptable feelings are given free reign, we can see why Felix, who presumably sees female readers as a conduit to the messages in their reading, is so 'digust[ed]' by Esther's reading.

In defiance of these fears, Eliot repeatedly argues that this feminine kind of reading involving the emotions and the body – and by extension, the feminine writers who provide

⁴⁸ Alicia Carroll, 'The Giaour's Campaign: Desire and the Other in "Felix Holt, The Radical"', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1997), 237-58, p. 248.

⁴⁹ George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 69.

⁵⁰ Kelly J. Mays, 'The Disease of Reading and Victorian Periodicals', in *Literature in the Marketplace*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 173.

⁵¹ See Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 20; see also Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, pp. 24-5.

⁵² See Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. chapter two, 'A Soulless Toy for Tyrant's Lust?: The Heroine as Passive Victim.'

⁵³ See Meridel Holland, 'Lord Byron's "The Dream" and Wuthering Heights', *Brontë Studies: The Journal of the Brontë Society*, 34 (2009), 31-46, pp. 32, 33.

this kind of material – are a necessary moral counterpart to masculine intellectual study and masculine works which were privileged in literary culture.

This stance is most clearly articulated through Eliot's portrait of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* (1872), a character who begins the novel ascribing to her culture's privileging of the masculine category and learns that in order to be a moral person and of benefit to one's community, one must approach literature from both a masculine (intellectual) and feminine (emotional, sexual) viewpoint.

In correspondence with her uncle's patronising estimations of the female intellect,⁵⁴ Dorothea begins *Middlemarch* identifying the cause of her intellectual frustration not in the values of her culture, but in her gender. She is 'shocked and discouraged at her own stupidity,' and, suspecting that 'there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason,' seeks a male guide to 'deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance' (60, 27). In contrast to Rosamond, 'a woman who lays herself out' to 'please' her audience, and who 'must be classed with flowers and music' (82, 153), Dorothea has a 'slight regard' for the 'small tinkling and smearing' of 'domestic music and feminine fine art.' Whilst Rosamond 'tinkles' on the piano, Dorothea sees herself being initiated into '[t]hose provinces of masculine knowledge,' 'a standing ground from which all truth could be seen more truly' (41, 59).

In order to embrace a masculine intellectual identity, it follows in Dorothea's thinking that she must reject a feminine, that is, an emotional and sexual, one. We are repeatedly reminded that Dorothea does not wish to be seen as an object of sexual interest: this is suggested in the 'Quakerish' dresses she wears, and also in her rejection of the idea of horseriding. The narrator comments that '[m]ost men thought [Dorothea] bewitching when she was on horseback' and it is no coincidence that she is 'urged to [the] brusque resolution' of giving up horseriding by Sir James's offer of a chestnut for her to try, a gesture forming part of his courtship ritual (9, 17).⁵⁵ By contrast, marriage to Casaubon promises to be entirely cerebral: as Mrs. Cadwallader so aptly puts it, 'marriage to Casaubon is as good as going to a nunnery' (54). Barbara Hardy suggests that the marriage is never consummated; certainly, no children come of it.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Mr. Brooke takes it for granted that '[women] are not thinkers.' The 'lightness' of the feminine mind' means that 'deep studies' such as classics and mathematics are 'too taxing' for them, he claims; they would do better to study music and the fine arts – but only 'in a light way.' George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. ed. Felicia Bonaparte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 9, 50, 60. Further citations in this chapter will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

⁵⁵ Masako Hirai, *Sisters in Literature* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 59-60.

⁵⁶ Barbara Hardy, *Particularities* (London: Peter Owen, 1982), p. 27.

As a representative of masculine literary engagement, Casaubon is presented as a social and intellectual failure. Lacking any exposure to feminine literature which would have developed ‘channels’ of empathy in his mind, he is insensitive or perhaps simply insensible to the suffering and joy of people in his community. This is signalled on two occasions marking life and death, Featherstone’s funeral and Casaubon’s honeymoon, during which he deserts the mourners and his bride to study alone (305, 80). This isolation extends to his work: ignoring the works of German scholars, he ‘grop[es] about in woods with a pocket-compass’ where other scholars have already ‘made good roads’ (31, 49, 195). Challenging the bias towards masculine writing in literary criticism, in Eliot’s novel, Casaubon’s approach has little moral, social or intellectual value.

By contrast, Dorothea’s second husband, Will Ladislaw embodies the androgynous ideal to which Eliot’s heroine ultimately comes to aspire. As well as excelling in masculine intellectual areas – he consults with Casaubon on theological matters, shows an interest in history during his stay in Rome and becomes involved in politics later in the novel (198, 199, 510) – he expresses himself through a variety of artistic media which in the scheme of the novel are considered feminine (painting, music, fiction, poetry). His exposure to these feminine art forms results in a character whose ‘channels’ of feeling are well developed. His emotions are displayed openly throughout *Middlemarch*: we see them in his blushing when he sees Dorothea, his uncontrolled sobbing when he parts from her, and in his fits of jealous anger when the painter Adolf Naumann touches her (191, 760, 202), all gestures which align him with the feeling, romantic hero.

Ladislaw’s account of what it is to be a poet reiterates the equal value of feminine and masculine literary art forms and approaches to writing: ‘[t]o be a poet,’ he tells Dorothea, ‘is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel [...] a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge’ (209). Here, Eliot may have been thinking of the Spasmodic poetry produced between 1840 and 1860, the term ‘spasmodic’ being drawn from the idea that reading such poetry would produce an involuntary physiological reaction from the reader, such as a muscular spasm. In the same vein as the sensation novel in the 1860s, this school of poetry was designed to act directly on the nervous system; the emphasis was on *feeling* the poetry rather than understanding it.⁵⁷ In Will’s reference to the movement, however, knowledge and feeling pass into one another; there is a communion between masculine and

⁵⁷ See Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 71-2, 94-5.

feminine modes of literary engagement in the mind and the body. Eliot, who uses Ladislaw to demonstrate that this balance is conducive to empathy, describes Ladislaw as ‘a creature who entered into every one’s feelings, and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance’ (467). This ‘iron resistance’ is exhibited by Casaubon, whose narcissism aligns him with the image of the candle at the centre of the pier glass. By contrast, Will’s mind is sensitive to external stimuli, and consequently he has a keener ear for ‘that roar which lies on the other side of silence’ (248, 182). Whereas conventionally a feminine approach to art would be associated with self-absorption, in Eliot’s reworking of the dichotomy, the masculine extreme becomes narcissistic and socially dangerous, and the feminine symptomatic of a more altruistic worldview.⁵⁸

Particular to *Middlemarch* is the gendering of aural stimuli, such as music and poetry which is intended to be read aloud, with feminine literary engagement, and of visual stimuli, such as Casaubon’s work on his *Key to All Mythologies*, with masculine literary engagement. In contrast to the text on the page, the listener has less control over how they receive sound: one may choose the pace at which they read, skip parts of a text or even put down a book, but the individual was not afforded the same control over a music or poetry recital in the nineteenth century. This corresponds to the idea established from the mid-eighteenth century that the masculine mode of reading was active reading; the reader analysed and questioned the material, rather than absorbing the information passively like a sponge, as per the feminine style.⁵⁹ We remember also that whereas silent reading or study can be achieved in isolation, music and poetry require a listener and are by definition social activities. Casaubon’s study deals in socially useless fact, whereas music and poetry appeal to the nerves and emotions. Significantly, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact “meaning” of sound. Unlike textual study, sound (like emotion) is a medium that resists rationalisation and which produces involuntary physiological responses in the listener.⁶⁰ By feminising sound, Eliot reinforces the importance of feminine elements in art in general and moral human relations. Productive social relations require an awareness of the feelings of others, a sensitivity, like that of the listener to sound, or of the ‘mental organism’ to its medium, that is synonymous with empathy.

By the end of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea has come to understand this distinction. She acknowledges that she conceived of herself as a ‘reflection’ of Casaubon’s greatness, not

⁵⁸ For a discussion of sensitivity to sound and empathy in the novel, see Kay Young, ‘Middlemarch and the Problem of Other Minds Heard’, *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14 (2003), 223-41.

⁵⁹ Flint, ‘Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*’, p. 251.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the links between music and emotion, see Young, pp. 231-2.

realising that it is through ‘feeling’ that she would move towards her ideal (198). Eliot rewards this recognition by allowing her both intellectual fulfilment in her support of Will’s political work, and sexual and social fulfilment in the roles of wife and mother (782-3). In Dorothea, Eliot embodies her egalitarian ideal of the androgynous female reader-artist.

Thus far, we have seen how Eliot questions her culture’s privileging of “masculine” thinking and asserts the value of works and literary approaches typically associated with women which were dismissed by misogynistic criticism. She teaches us that the development of authorship which is socially and morally beneficial is dependent on the tempering of masculine fact with feminine feeling and empathy. If Eliot’s approach were adopted, this would allow women’s literature to be judged on a level playing field with those of male authors, fulfilling the egalitarian aim she describes in her defence of realism.

The egalitarian ideal which promotes the value of female authorship in *Middlemarch* does not always match up with Eliot’s moral stance elsewhere in her fiction, however. This becomes clear when we examine the values of the moral teachers who feature in her novels, particularly with regard to female education. Often in these instances we see Eliot undermining herself and endorsing derogatory stereotypes about female literary engagement and women’s proper social role. Her teachers become defensive constructs through which Eliot insists on the importance of womanliness over female creativity, all the while presenting herself, the author, as an exception to the rule. Consequently Eliot’s commitment to championing female authorship becomes open to question.

Eliot’s Moral Teachers and their Teachings

In *Adam Bede*, the schoolmaster Bartle Massey runs the night-school in Hayslope. He is explicitly presented as a misogynist: he excludes women from the school, claiming learning as a masculine purview, and his feelings towards Hetty, ‘that bit o’ pink-and-white they’ve taken the trouble to put into jail,’ amount only to contempt: ‘I don’t value her a rotten nut,’ he claims unabashedly, ‘only for the harm or good that may come out of her to an honest man’ (374).⁶¹

Yet, in spite of his refusal to even contemplate Hetty as a victim of circumstance and his willingness to make her a scapegoat for a transgression of which Arthur Donnithorne was also guilty, Bartle Massey is presented as a moral pillar of the community. His school presents a model of how reading leads to social empowerment. Through the basic education

⁶¹ Dinah Birch, ‘“Good Teaching”: Adam Bede and Education’, *George Eliot Review: Journal of the George Eliot Fellowship*, 41 (2010), 7-15, p. 10.

he provides, the illiterate become literate, and, in the case of one student, the dyer, their work is made more profitable (212), with immediate benefit to their families and the wider community. It is no coincidence that Massey's best student, Adam, is the moral centre of the novel. Adam, who often stays up past midnight studying (209), is presented as a productive, honest worker who serves the needs of the community. Bartle Massey offers key support to Adam during Hetty's trial: it is his 'strong gentle love,' the empathy that Massey demonstrates for Adam, we are told, that will 'be Adam's companion and helper till death.' Implicitly, Massey, who is present at Adam's wedding at the end of the novel, is a vital figure in the 'harvest from that painful seed-time' (477).

On Eliot's part, there seems to be some consciousness of, or defensiveness about, the disjunction between Massey's moral status and his attitudes towards women, and this accounts for attempts in the narrative to excuse and diminish his misogyny. We are told of a past love affair that ended badly for him, a 'hard sorrow' which accounts for, or excuses, his distorted views of women;⁶² and at the close of the narrative, the narrator comments wryly that although Bartle Massey attends Adam and Dinah's wedding 'under protest against marriage in general,' he kisses Dinah once more than is necessary in the vestry (477), suggesting that his misogyny is somewhat of an outward show. Like Hetty's fate, the narrative attempts to gloss over Massey's hatred towards women and the consequences of this hatred for women like Hetty who are refused education on the grounds of their gender.

This ambivalence emerges again in the transformation Dinah Morris, the spiritual teacher of Hayslope, undergoes near the end of the novel. Eliot explores ideas about female authorship through this figure. For the most part of the novel, Eliot uses her as a foil, or feminist alternative, to Bartle Massey's prejudiced ideas about women and female education, as Dinah unites both of the gendered categories of literary engagement in her service to her community. Combining her understanding of scripture (the intellectual masculine approach) and her love for the people in the village (the emotional feminine approach), it is she who comforts Hetty and brings her to some understanding of her crime (104, 402-8). Through Dinah's intervention, we see the beginnings of empathy in Hetty: her 'hard' heart 'open[s]' to God (404, 410).

As well as a spiritual teacher, Dinah is a veiled portrait of an artist. She has been read specifically as a reincarnation of Madame de Staël's *improvisatrice* Corinne.⁶³ We remember that both the heroine and her author Madame de Staël were seen by subsequent female

⁶² See Birch, p. 9.

⁶³ For parallels between the two characters, see Moers, pp. 192-4.

literary artists as proof that the feminine constitution could house masculine genius. Dinah's preaching is emphatically a form of improvisation, and this is illustrated most clearly in Dinah's account of how she became a preacher. With brother Marlowe taken ill, Dinah initially intends to 'read and pray' with the people of the village, but is inspired to deliver her own text: 'I felt a great movement in my soul,' Dinah reports, 'and I trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body [...] I spoke the words that were given to me abundantly.' She is an artist inspired by a religious muse, and Dinah's improvised text imparts powerful messages of moral and social good, two of Eliot's requisites of artistry. As graphically demonstrated by the violent reaction of Bessy Cranage, who is so 'terr[ified]' by Dinah's words that she 'wrench[es] her ear-rings from her ears' and 'sob[s] aloud,' '[Dinah] always master[s] her audience' (83, 29). This mastery might well be read as that of an actress casting a spell over her audience: 'She had made a long pause before the exclamation, and the pause seemed to be filled by agitating thoughts that showed themselves in her features' (25).

As Christine Krueger notes, Dinah's implied role as an artist is supported by the parallels between Dinah's preaching and authorship. Dinah has the moral authority to call both men and women to repentance through her text, and she defies social expectations by rejecting an identity based on her beauty and by refusing Seth's offer of marriage on the grounds that a husband and children would interfere with her vocation (32).⁶⁴ In contrast to Hetty, Dinah has 'no room' for any consciousness that she is 'a lovely young woman on whom men's eyes are fixed.' There is 'no blush, no tremulousness, which said, 'I know you think me a pretty woman, too young to preach'' (83, 21). She trusts her own sense of moral authority and, significantly, her own interpretation of the Bible, over cultural pressure to conform to a more conventional image of womanhood, as embodied in Hetty Sorrel, a woman who is created and destroyed by the values of her culture. Her power within her community is not reliant on her status as a sexual object, but on her moral, intellectual and creative capabilities.

Thus far, Dinah stands as an ideal alternative to the model of femininity presented by Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*. However, once she displaces Hetty as the female focus of the narrative, Eliot's approach to her characterisation changes quite drastically. This change is accounted for by a new Methodist policy which bars women from preaching, however this does not fully account for the transformation Dinah undergoes. It is apparent that as the heroine, she is now required to conform to a more conventional form of femininity, a

⁶⁴ Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 252.

transformation which is signalled by her blushing. Prior to Hetty's removal from the narrative, Dinah, as we have seen, is not given to blushing (21), but with Hetty's femininity proven to be of the monstrous, socially-dangerous kind, a palatable, more modest form of femininity must now be read on her substitute's body, and in the final book of *Adam Bede*, Dinah blushes over and over:⁶⁵ Eliot shows that Dinah must submit to her own sexuality, but this is not, as Nancy Paxton argues, a feminist assertion, for it comes at the expense of her art.⁶⁶ In a blunt reversal of the reasons she provided for rejecting Seth's offer of marriage, Dinah's nuptials in the closing chapters of the novel coincide with the news that she no longer preaches; she has exchanged her unconventional but 'limited public role' for conventional domesticity,⁶⁷ her artistry for wifehood and motherhood, 'set[ting] th' example o' submitting' to her fellow women (481). She may now be considered an ideal woman and is integrated into her community. Rather than a feminist corrective to the patriarchal ideas about femininity with which Hetty was unknowingly indoctrinated, the Dinah of the closing chapters of *Adam Bede* would seem to echo Massey's ideas about intellect and creativity as a male province, and about female sexuality and its proper context.

Perhaps Eliot realised, on some level, the implications for her art in *Adam Bede*, because she tried again few years later, in *Romola* (1863), to create a portrait of an intelligent, female moral teacher. Like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Romola undergoes a conversion over the course of her narrative. In the opening chapters, her blind father, the scholar Bardo has tried and failed to compensate for the 'wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind' by 'cramming [his daughter] with Greek and Latin.'⁶⁸ Initially, Romola accepts his view of her as an inadequate substitute for a son and promises to 'study diligently' so that she might 'be as useful to [him] as if [she] had been a boy' (54). Over the course of the book, however, Romola learns for herself the values Eliot wishes to teach the reader, and asserts the need for feminine feeling in both a literary and social context: she comes to exemplify the application of knowledge and empathy for social good in her role as the saintly Madonna Romola, a woman who tends to the sick, feeds the starving, and supports her husband's unwitting mistress and family as the matriarchal head of the household.

⁶⁵ On the issue of Dinah's blushing and female sexuality, see Margaret Homans, 'Dinah's Blush, Maggie's Arm: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Eliot's Early Novels', *Victorian Studies*, 36 (1993), 155-78, p. 168; also see Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Learning to Read: Interpersonal Literacy in Adam Bede', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 44 (2008), 145-67, pp. 161-2.

⁶⁶ Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 45.

⁶⁷ Deborah Heller, *Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 4.

⁶⁸ George Eliot, *Romola*. ed. Dorothea Barrett (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 51, 190. Further citations in this chapter will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

‘Matriarchal’ is a problematic adjective in that last sentence. Feminist readings of *Romola* have been reliant on the idea of its learned heroine asserting herself as the head of a mostly female household at the close of the novel, but ultimately Romola is more patriarch than matriarch.⁶⁹ Whilst Ninna, Tito’s illegitimate daughter, helps her mother weave on one side of the room, Romola sits on the opposite side with Lillo, Tito’s son, to whom she imparts her wisdom as the novel closes (580-3). By educating the sole male member of the household and excluding its women, this scene recalls Bartle Massey’s idea of learning and all things cerebral as a male province, unsuited to the limited female mind. This is compounded by the book Romola gives her student to read, a volume of Petrarch which is the source of one of her father’s most misogynistic quotations about the intellectual limitations of women earlier in the novel.⁷⁰ Again, intellect and creativity are claimed as a male province, and we are left questioning the value Eliot accords to female intellect and creativity.

This pattern of contradiction is not exclusive to Eliot’s teachers. As discussed previously, throughout her fiction we are presented with portraits of female reader-artists, many of whom Eliot uses in an effort to construct her androgynous female reader-writer ideal. Ultimately, however, all of these portraits are undercut, and the female reader-artists are relegated to one of two categories which remained prevalent in patriarchal literary criticism at this time: that of the de-feminised or de-sexed intellectual who has sacrificed her femininity to her authorship, and the so-called feminine woman who relinquishes her authorship for the sake of social acceptance. In each of these portraits, we see Eliot’s artistic aspirations at odds with her anxieties about the compatibility of her gender and her vocation. The following discussion of female reader-authors is imperative to our understanding of the problematic position Eliot’s fiction occupied for the subsequent female authors examined in this thesis.

The Female Reader-Artist Undercut

I began this thesis with a discussion of how Maggie Tulliver’s reading of *Corinne* was used by Eliot to articulate the dilemma facing the female author. Whilst this reading of Maggie as a thwarted author remains valid for the first two volumes, by the time we reach the third volume of the novel, changes in Maggie’s characterisation bring about a whole new set of ideas about female authorship which contradict those previously articulated. I will be arguing

⁶⁹ Diane Elam, for instance, sees the ending of the novel as deeply masculinist, and identifies Romola as a surrogate patriarch in Tito’s absence. See Elam, p. 122.

⁷⁰ See Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 314n5.

that in the final volume, Maggie transforms from a frustrated female author⁷¹ into a more stereotypical image of the narcissistic female reader who is corrupted by the romances she devours – an image which warns of the dangers, moral and social, of unsupervised female literary engagement and diminishes Maggie's artistic potential. Engaging creatively with literature – an activity akin to authorship – Maggie becomes a danger to herself and her community.

The Mill on the Floss work has frequently been read as a novel of two parts: after its publication in 1860, R. H. Hutton claimed that '[t]here is no single plot in *The Mill on the Floss*; it is a masterly fragment of fictitious biography in two volumes, followed by a second-rate one-volume novel.'⁷² *The Saturday Review* agreed that '[t]he third volume seems to belong to quite a new story,' explaining that 'the young woman with overmastering passion is very slightly connected with the little Maggie of the Mill who makes her appearance at the beginning of the novel.' It added: 'we are not sorry when the tremendous machinery of a flood is called in to drown off two of the principal characters.'⁷³

Significantly, these claims tend to cite Maggie's scandalous elopement with Stephen as evidence of this discrepancy.⁷⁴ With this in mind, I would suggest that the transformation Maggie undergoes between the second and third volumes of *The Mill on the Floss* is from a frustrated female reader-author to a stereotype of the narcissistic female reader who is corrupted by the romances she devours, and also the stereotype of her author counterpart who conjures up and re-enacts the romantic scenarios of the literature she writes. Like Flaubert's Emma Bovary, the Maggie of the final volume warns of the dangers of uncontrolled feminine reading of feminine material, and, most significantly, of the social and moral threat posed by creative women – a threat which justifies her destruction at the close of the novel.

As the novel progresses, Maggie's romance reading increasingly emphasises that '[t]he world outside the books [is] not a happy one' (235); like the stereotypical female reader of romance, she has absorbed the messages about female identity and happiness from her reading, and has cultivated unrealistic, romantic and fundamentally narcissistic expectations.⁷⁵ The more she is exposed to romances, the more pronounced these 'channels'

⁷¹ In a deleted section of the manuscript, Eliot compared Maggie to a would-be author: 'A girl of no startling appearance, and who will never be a Sappho or a Madame Roland [...] may still hold forces within her [...] which will make way for themselves, often in a shattering, violent manner' (527n235).

⁷² R. H. Hutton, 'The Novels of George Eliot', *National Review*, 11 (July 1860), 191-218, p. 214.

⁷³ 'Review of *The Mill on the Floss*', *Saturday Review*, 9 (14 April 1860), 470-1, p. 471.

⁷⁴ Another example of this can be found in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), p. 36.

⁷⁵ See Flint, 'Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*', p. 251.

of thought become in Maggie's thinking. Maggie is presented as being torn between proper, womanly self-renunciation, a mode of being in which the reading of romantic literature does not feature, and yielding to the monstrous desires inspired by her reading. Offered a volume of Walter Scott's *The Pirate*, Maggie refuses it, explaining that '[i]t would make me in love with this world again [...] it would make me long for a full life' (306). This struggle becomes explicit near the end of the novel, where she begins to succumb to the 'hideous, overpowering strength' of 'all the worst evil in her' and considers caving in to her adulterous passion for Stephen: 'why should not Lucy – why should not Philip suffer?' she asks. Why, when 'all that her nature craved' 'was brought within her reach' 'was she to forego it?' (458). Why should she not rewrite herself as 'chief actress,' as Eliot put it in her letter to Maria Lewis? Subject to these uncontrollable moments of narcissistic, 'unfeminine' desire, Maggie writes herself into the scenes of her reading and elopes with her cousin's fiancé.

The flood serves a dual function. As the symbolic product of Maggie's monstrous sexuality, it serves to demonise her. She has potentially destroyed a socially-acceptable relationship between Stephen and Lucy, and displaced a woman who behaves according to social expectations. As a threat to the patriarchal family unit, it is fitting, that Maggie's sexuality is presented as a flood which wreaks havoc on the wider community. At the same time, the flood also represents a social intervention which restores order; as a threat to her community and to its values, Maggie must be removed and destroyed, a judgement which, as we have seen, several contemporary critics applauded.⁷⁶ If *Corinne* emphasises the difficulties of being a female artist, then *The Mill on the Floss* diminishes and demonises this figure, reducing Maggie to the maligned stereotype of the imitative, passive reader and the writer of feminine 'trash.'

The fine line between highlighting the social machinery which produces women who engage with literature in what contemporary commentators deemed a feminine way, and demonising them for their narrow approach to reading and authorship is repeatedly crossed in Eliot's later works, most notably in portraits which are, initially at least, critical of female education standards. We find an example of this in Eliot's portrait of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*. Let us look first at how Eliot presents her as a product of poor education standards for women. Here, as in other novels, the female reader's education may be read as

⁷⁶ Not only is Maggie removed, but in the closing pages, the narrative attempts to displace Maggie with an earlier, more palatable image of her from earlier in the novel. As A. Robert Lee notes, Tom's final 'Magsie' and the image of brother and sister 'clasp[ing] their little hands in love' and 'roam[ing] the daisied fields together' conjures up an image of Maggie's girlhood innocence which runs counter to the transgressive, romance reading Maggie of the final volume (521). See A. Robert Lee, 'The Mill on the Floss: 'Memory' and the Reading Experience', in *Reading the Victorian Novel*, ed. Ian Gregor (Great Britain: Vision Press, 1980), pp. 88-9.

the imposition of an identity from an impressionable age, before the individual can question what they are being taught.

Rosamond's education shapes her into a lesser feminine reader-artist, much like the self-indulgent 'average' female author Eliot describes in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.' A student at the aptly named Mrs Lemon's school, Rosamond's education revolves around cultivating accomplishments with which to attract a wealthy husband – 'even to extras, such as getting in and out of a carriage' (89). Rosamond is trained 'to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank,' and has the requisite 'combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness' to be the 'perfect lady' (156, 252). These accomplishments, which 'would all be laid aside as soon as she was married' (157), are a means of showcasing Rosamond's attributes, and her life is consequently seen in the light of a never-ending performance; she is a mirror to the values her society prizes in its female members, 'an actress of parts' who plays her own 'so well, that she d[oes] not know it to be precisely her own' (109). Any creativity she displays over the course of Eliot's novel is presented as pure imitation: though an accomplished musician, Rosamond plays 'with the precision of an echo' (150). Like the maligned female novelist of Eliot's time, Rosamond merely mimics male artists, in this case Kapellmeister, her teacher.

Her reading likewise ascribes to the feminine stereotype employed in contemporary literary criticism. Rosamond's relationship with all external stimuli – including people and fiction – is determined by the narcissistic gratification they potentially provide. She projects herself into the texts she reads, and identifies or empathises only in a way that gratifies her narcissism. Rosamond's favourite poem is the oriental romance 'Lalla Rookh' (157) in which the daughter of an emperor falls in love with a poet, only to find he is the prince to whom she is already betrothed. Rosamond is emphatically a passive reader of romance, becoming a conduit to the messages in her reading: just as the heroine of 'Lalla Rookh' is sought by male heroes in an exotic setting, Rosamond casts herself as the object of male desire, and Lydgate as the foreign prince-poet who comes to seek her hand. Her ability to relate to others is severely reduced; it matters not whether she loves Lydgate, only that he signals his love for her (613), and her understanding of good and evil depends on how successfully the romantic scenarios of her reading may be modelled onto her situation. This is particularly true of her relationship with her husband, which she comes to see as one of victim and oppressor (620). The education that Rosamond has been subjected to ensures that she cannot actively engage with – and ideally, question the ideological content of – any text. Neither her social milieu

nor her education have helped Rosamond develop ‘channels’ of empathy. Any understanding of the people around her, or of her relationship with wider society, is not necessary in a woman who serves an ornamental purpose.

As the novel progresses, the narrator’s sympathy for Rosamond diminishes. Whilst the narrative is clear that Rosamond is a victim of her culture, it also demonises her, presenting her as a socially and morally dangerous individual. This is particularly true when she miscarries whilst out horseriding against her husband’s wishes (549-50). We recall that Hetty Sorrel also brings about the death of her child in *Adam Bede*, but whereas Hetty’s intentions are left open to question, there is no doubt in *Middlemarch* that Rosamond chose to endanger the life of her unborn child, and not out of necessity or ignorance, but for the sake of selfish pleasure. There is something distinctly monstrous about this aspect of Rosamond’s portrait, an unmaternal coldness that arises again in the portraits of the female artists in ‘Armgarth’ (1871) and *Daniel Deronda*; but whereas for Armgarth and Leonora Halm-Eberstein, this coldness is at least in part redeemed by their art, Rosamond’s art is narcissistic and socially defunct. Rosamond’s portrait communicates that morality equates with maternal feeling in women, and Lydgate is presented as a victim of her stereotypically feminine narcissism: at the end of the narrative, we are told that ‘Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully’ (752). We have the sense that this marriage plays a fundamental role in his early death at the age of fifty (781).

On first examination, Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* strikes us as another instance of a young female character whose poor reading and narcissistic creativity reflect the patriarchal ideology impressed on her through her paltry education. However, her example presents something more complex which further highlights Eliot’s ambivalence about female authorship. Gwendolen is not so much demonised as crushed by the events that transpire in her narrative, a distinction which, I would suggest, is rooted in the narrative’s more explicit representation of Gwendolen as a female author. This is a brutal narrative in which the female protagonist has her creativity effectively beaten out of her. Gwendolen comes to understand that her creativity is immoral and has no social value; over the course of the narrative, she is forced to realise that in order to lead ‘a woman’s life’ (128), one cannot be an author.

Like Rosamond, Gwendolen’s education and private reading seems to have achieved little beyond fuelling her narcissistic worldview. A conventional mix of feminine accomplishments including languages, music and literature, Gwendolen’s education provides

her with the illusory sense of being the candle at the centre of the pier glass. After her schooling, 'what remain[s] of all things knowable' she is 'conscious of being sufficiently acquainted with through novels, plays, and poems' (31), all of which appear to function for Gwendolen's narcissistic gratification. We recall that Rosamond presents herself as an object for public consumption: Gwendolen concretises the metaphor in the *Winter's Tale* tableau, in which she quite literally positions herself as an object intended to evoke admiration. Though she has been exposed to intellectually-heavy works by Racine, Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe (48, 36), Gwendolen's reading is apparently very much a one way process, in which she introjects herself into the text for her own pleasure. She irreverently alters Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* to show her to advantage as Hermione in the tableau, having Leontes kneel and kiss the hem of her garment like an admiring subject when she awakens rather than embracing her, and removing all unnecessary dialogue lest 'the effect of her majesty [should] be marred by anyone's speech' (48). Like Rosamond, this creative response is narcissistic, imitative and socially unproductive, and therefore immoral – the very qualities, gendered feminine in patriarchal literary criticism, that Eliot felt it was necessary to overcome in order to justify her own authorship.

Beyond this point, there are distinct differences between Rosamond's and Gwendolen's engagement with literature. Whereas Rosamond tries (and fails) to insert herself directly into the romantic scenarios of her reading, Gwendolen's aspirations do not lie comfortably within the parameters for women provided in the literature she reads. She resorts, therefore, to writing her own narratives. In the early portions of her story, she is often presented conjuring up alternative scenarios for herself. These are symbolic acts of authorship, in which she unfailingly features as the heroine and is socially empowered:

Her thoughts never dwelt on marriage as the fulfilment of her ambition [...] To be very much sued or hopelessly sighed for as a bride was indeed an indispensable and agreeable guarantee of womanly power; but to become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity [...] Of course marriage was a social promotion [but] a peerage will not quite do instead of leadership to the man who meant to lead; and this delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead. (30-1)

There are parallels between Dorothea and Gwendolen here. Dorothea's goal at the start of *Middlemarch* is fuelled by the inadequacy of her education: she desires to be initiated into the Great Truths of masculine knowledge and to be delivered from her 'girlish' ignorance. Gwendolen also identifies her reading as inadequate here, recognising that it reproduces the social values that insist on the necessity of the feminine destiny she seeks to evade. The

narrative into which she wishes to write herself is one of 'power' and 'leadership,' one traditionally belonging to a 'man.' Essentially, both women begin their narratives with the desire to transcend the limits of their gender in their pursuit of masculine eminence, and this involves a rejection of contemporary definitions of femininity and feminine literature.

Uniquely for Gwendolen, she does this through self-narrativising, a form of independent self-definition and symbolic authorship which goes against social conventions and all the limitations they entail. Of all the female reader-artists featured in Eliot's fiction, Gwendolen's artistry is closest to authorship, and this is why Eliot's attitudes towards her self-narrativising are so problematic in *Daniel Deronda*. The problems Gwendolen tries to resolve through her symbolic acts of authorship are recognisable, in the modern sense of the phrase, as feminist dilemmas. Whilst Gwendolen enjoys being the centre of attention, she is loath to be a sexual object (66, 67), a role culminating, so Gwendolen sees it, in the misery of marriage, a model of patriarchal oppression. Repeatedly throughout the opening chapters of *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen vows she will never submit to male authority, and when faced with hardship, she manoeuvres to support her mother and sisters independently, rejecting the distasteful alternatives laid out for them by her uncle (22, 201, 215). This consistent refusal to submit creates an uneasy relationship with the romantic material she reads, and she resorts instead to writing herself into empowering romantic scenarios. At the prospect of being sought by Grandcourt, she tells her mother: '[m]y arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave [...] and fall at my feet. I shall laugh at him – he will rise in resentment – I shall laugh more' (79). Later, when she is finally brought to accept Grandcourt in the knowledge of his mistress and their children, she rewrites the situation, assuring herself that 'when she was Grandcourt's wife, she would urge him to the most liberal conduct towards Mrs Glasher's children' (264). 'Gwendolen wished to mount the chariot and drive the plunging horses herself, with a spouse by her side who would fold his arms and give her countenance without looking ridiculous,' and through such narrative making, she 'ha[s] the white reins in her hands again' and 'exercise[s] her power' (115, 253-4).

At times, we cannot help but feel we are meant to admire Gwendolen for her efforts to defy social convention and empower herself through her symbolic acts of authorship. Elsewhere, however, the narrator is disparaging about Gwendolen's creativity, insisting that it is limited by its 'feminine' qualities. The narrator acknowledges that 'masculine' sentiments 'dwell in feminine breasts,' but adds that 'they dwelt among strictly feminine furniture' in Gwendolen's case. 'She meant to do what was pleasant to herself in a striking manner; or

rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration and get in that reflected way a more ardent sense of living, seemed pleasant to her fancy' (31). Limited by the 'feminine furniture' with which her mind is equipped, Gwendolen's ambitions (which she will never achieve anyway) are flawed and not worthy of being obtained. At this point, the narrator detracts from the feminist significance of Gwendolen's self-narrativising by locating her ambitions within the model of narcissistic, feminine reading and authorship, and glossing over the fact that her fantasies also have their basis in a desire for social freedom.

The narrative not only belittles the social significance of Gwendolen's authorship, but increasingly as the narrative progresses, it punishes her for her creativity. Rather than seeking to push her towards a gender-balanced approach to literature as we see in Dorothea's narrative in *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* brutally impresses upon its female reader-artist the impossibility of embodying the empowered, artistic roles she writes for herself: at Leubronn, Deronda's ironic look terminates her winning streak and with it her identity as the 'heroine of the gaming-table' (231); her uncle Gascoigne rejects her role as the daring huntress, predicting that it will damage her marriage prospects (63-4); the musician Klesmer dashes her hopes of a glittering career on stage as an opera singer and actress, informing her 'you will hardly achieve more than mediocrity' (221); Grandcourt asks that she will oblige him in future by not 'showing whims like a mad woman in a play,' and will instead conduct herself in public as befits his wife (383).

Interestingly, we see the beginnings of empathy in Gwendolen signalled through her changing relationship with literature towards the end of the novel. The text no longer serves as a platform for narcissistic gratification, but as an avenue into her mentor's consciousness; that is, literature becomes a means with which to identify with and understand him. She reads 'Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Butler, Burke [and] Guizot' 'feeling sure that Deronda had read them, and hoping that by dipping into them all in succession, with her rapid understanding she might get a point of view nearer to his level' (467-8). As Graham Handley suggests, these works might be beyond Gwendolen's grasp (716n467), but the very act of her choosing such intellectually-heavy works on the basis of their appeal to her mentor indicates she is mid-way through a significant moral transition, and that psychologically, her relation to her fellow man is changing into something more mutual and socially productive – new 'channels' of thought are being formed in her mind.

Nonetheless, this newfound empathy seems to come at the cost of Gwendolen's feminism, and with it her creativity. She ends the novel accepting the disparity between her imagined narratives and the bleak reality of 'a woman's life' (128), which is one of suffering

and submission. There is the prospect of recovery and growth, but the novel ends at too crucial a moment for the reader to be entirely sure how (or if) Gwendolen will achieve any degree of masculine freedom, and whether her creativity will resurface.⁷⁷ The fates of the other female artists at the end of this novel, which reinforce the disparity between femininity and artistry, are not promising in this respect: Mirah, whose voice, according to Klesmer, is suited only to a domestic setting, gives up her artistic career to settle in Palestine with Daniel, and Daniel's mother, Leonora Halm Eberstein, in spite of her glittering career on stage, dies having rejected family life.

As a model of female authorship, Gwendolen Harleth functions to teach the reader that women's artistic aspirations beyond the conventional female lot are morally and socially undesirable, the starkest instance in which Eliot undermines her efforts to champion female authorship. Eliot uses this character to articulate the broader social significance of female authorship and the opportunities it provides for female self-definition outside of the confines of patriarchal ideology; but ultimately, Eliot feels compelled to impress upon her protagonist the understanding that her symbolic acts of authorship, and more fundamentally her efforts to define herself without limitation, are valueless and futile. Her moral reformation of Gwendolen is an insistence on the validity of critical bias against female literary engagement.

Conclusion

An examination of Eliot's fictional female readers demonstrates a fundamental inconsistency in the author's attitudes towards female authorship across her fiction. Women who are limited or destroyed by their culture's restriction of their reading and creativity are presented both as social victims and threats to their communities. The masculine narratives into which some female readers try to write themselves are permitted, with revisions, but denied for others; Eliot either endorses challenges to patriarchal authority or punishes female characters who try to transgress their allotted roles by means of their reading.

The only socially integrated, 'feminine' female character in Eliot's fiction who embodies Eliot's androgynous reader-writer ideal is Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. As feminist critics have noted, however, the closing pages of the novel compromise this status. Summarising critics' objections to Dorothea's fate in *Middlemarch* in the 1970s, Zelda Austen wrote that

⁷⁷ Barbara Hardy, 'Introduction', in *Daniel Deronda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 28.

Feminist critics are angry with George Eliot because she did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry [...] George Eliot should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there.⁷⁸

Instead, the flawed ideal of vicarious intellectual fulfilment which Dorothea cultivated in her first marriage continues in her second:

Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women [...] Will became an ardent public man [and] Dorothea could have liked nothing better [...] that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in certain circles as a wife and mother. (782-3)

Dorothea remains the 'lampholder' she envisioned prior to her marriage to Casaubon, domestic helpmeet to a public male intellectual figure.

An examination of the women readers in Eliot's fiction provides us with a portrait of an author who uses her fiction not only to communicate her moral ideals in an effort to shape the reader, but as a staging ground for exploring her ambivalent feelings about being a female author. Her fiction, like her essays, is full of contradictions, making it difficult to define her stance on female authorship: Eliot defends the moral and artistic value of 'feminine' feeling but is highly critical of the stereotypes of 'feminine' literary engagement which feature in her fiction; she warns against the pitfalls of privileging one gendered mode of literary engagement over another, but struggles to conceive of the androgynous ideal she points towards. Her attitude towards women seeking masculine eminence socially and as artists is very problematic: she approves of their aims but at the same time reinforces the opposition between contemporary concepts of natural femininity, especially wifehood and motherhood, and a 'masculine' artistic calling. Throughout her fiction, her need to assert herself as a female artist vies with her need to distinguish herself from her female colleagues and endorse the gender bias of contemporary literary criticism.

The dual nature of Eliot's fiction accounts for the diverse responses to her fiction, allowing women like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Harriet Beecher Stowe to identify in the author a moral, feminist paragon, whilst at the same time evincing reactions like those of contemporary critics who applauded Maggie Tulliver's destruction and Gwendolen Harleth's resignation. Midway between the two, some readers, like Zelda Austen and Kate Millett,

⁷⁸ Zelda Austen, 'Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot', *College English*, 37 (1976), 549-61, p. 549.

found themselves frustrated that Eliot, who articulates her feminist arguments so powerfully, failed to realise the artistic alternatives she points towards in her fiction.⁷⁹ In many ways, the contradictions inherent throughout Eliot's works, contradictions which are played out so intensely and so close to the surface of her work, ensured her success. By this I mean that as readers, we can, in effect, choose the text we want to read: through her failure to provide a unified stance, we may choose to read Eliot's feminism, or, if this feminism makes us feel uncomfortable, we may choose to be reassured that this feminism is consistently undermined throughout her writing. Like Eliot then, the reader may have it both ways. If we consider the role Eliot's critical reception played in her success as a writer, perhaps it is only logical that the feminist stance she takes is consistently tempered and overshadowed, limiting the threat she posed to the critical authorities she sought to attack. Eliot at once challenged contemporary literary standards of valuation and made her writing more palatable to those critics who still saw femininity as opposed to authorship, an ambivalence which ensured her enduring status.

Eliot's ambivalence about female authorship accounts for how attractive and provocative her works were for female writers. She tapped into concerns that necessarily affected every woman who chose to take up her pen, giving voice to their divided status. Furthermore, by failing to resolve the issues she lays out in her fiction, Eliot effectively threw down the gauntlet to subsequent female writers who read her work.

From this point, this thesis will be concerned with exploring how a select number of female writers in Britain and America appropriated Eliot's female reader as a site on which to explore their anxieties and aspirations about their vocation. The next chapter discusses the lesser-known late-nineteenth-century American writer Constance Fenimore Woolson who was an open admirer of Eliot's fiction, and whose confidence as a writer was deeply shaken by revelations about Eliot's personal life after she left America in 1879.

⁷⁹ See Austen, esp. p. 549, and Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press, 1977), p. 139.

Chapter Three: Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-1894) and the Female Literary Artist in Transition

How can you say George Eliot was unhappy? I think that she had one of the easiest, most indulged and “petted” lives that I have ever known or heard of – considering that she was a woman without a fortune [...] and without the least beauty, in fact, very plain. From first to last, she did exactly as she pleased – law or no law, custom or no custom! Lewes adored her; I heard all the details in London. She was surrounded by the most devoted, personal, worshipping affection to his last hour. True, she earned the money for two, and she worked very hard. But how many, many women would be glad to do the same through all their lives if their reward was such a devoted love as that! Then, with a very short interregnum, this plain woman of sixty inspires with the same worshipping adoration another man [...] a man of excellent mind and character, with a fortune of his own, handsome, strong, only forty years old. And up to the last moment of her life, his love continued unchanged [...] the one thing I have against her is that after getting and having to the full all she craved, then she began to pose as a teacher for others! She began to preach the virtues she had not for one moment practised in her own life. [...] I don’t think she ever felt, or was haunted by the slightest touch of remorse for what she had done; it alienated all her own family – the brother she had loved so fondly while a girl – but all this was nothing to her compared with her love.

— Constance Fenimore Woolson to Emily Vernon Clarke, [n.d.] ¹

The most crucial point in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s writing career arguably came in 1879 when she departed from her native United States and arrived in London, the city where George Eliot lived the last twenty years of her life and would die in 1880. Woolson learned, or rather inferred from London gossip and, most likely, the scores of biographies and testimonies that flooded out of Britain and America after Eliot’s death, that Eliot had been treated as an exception amongst women, a celebrated ‘masculine’ writer whose scandalous private life did not mark her out as a social outcast.

Before she left America, Woolson saw George Eliot as a literary and feminist icon, and her sense of identity as a writer was closely bound up with her ideas about Eliot and her authorship. Later in this chapter, we will see that Woolson wanted to emulate Eliot’s writing style, and that her work frequently borrows from Eliot’s fiction, particularly *The Mill on the Floss* which was Woolson’s favourite novel.² The sudden change in attitude exhibited in her letter to Emily Vernon Clarke, then, is surprising to say the least, and its intrigue is compounded by the reasons Woolson provides for that change: her objections seem to centre on Eliot’s apparent success with the opposite sex, the ‘worshipping,’ ‘devoted love’ she received from G. H. Lewes and John Cross.

¹ Letter to Miss Emily Vernon Clarke, [n.d.], in Sharon L. Dean, ed., *The Complete Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), p. 550.

² Letter to Paul Hamilton Hayne, All Saint's Say [1875], in J. B. Hubbell, 'Some New Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson', *New England Quarterly*, 14 (1941), 715-35, p. 724.

On further inspection, we see that the underlying concern of Woolson's letter is the opposition between authorship and romance, or what would have been known more generally as femininity, a tension which was well established in branches of literary criticism at this time. Woolson's exaggeration of the freedoms Eliot enjoyed – 'she had one of the easiest, most indulged and "petted" lives that I have ever known or heard of' – centres on her perception that Eliot was not tasked with reconciling her authorship with her femininity, unlike Woolson and her contemporaries, and thus her choice of vocation presented no hindrance to her personal relationships. In her letter, Woolson shies away from articulating this directly, instead listing a host of other ways in which the author transgressed the bounds of femininity without apparent social recrimination: she 'alienated' and abandoned her family without remorse to cohabit with a married man, thus qualifying as a fallen woman, and then married her second partner in spite of being 'plain,' poor and twenty years his senior. In her criticism that Eliot then had the audacity to 'preach the virtues she had not for one moment practised in her own life,' the fundamental concern of authorship comes closer to the surface. It would appear that Woolson assumed that Eliot's experiences of being a female author corresponded with the struggles of her female characters in her narratives; and so in relating to these characters' struggles Woolson had developed a strong sense of identification with the author. In London, she discovered, or inferred, a disparity between the ideas about female authorship expressed in Eliot's fiction, and the author's experience of it. Eliot behaved and wrote as she liked, 'law or no law, custom or no custom!' and Woolson felt betrayed. The revelations about Eliot's personal life severely undermined the sense of identification Woolson felt with Eliot, and compromised Eliot as a figure to be emulated. If, prior to her departure for Europe, Woolson saw Eliot as living proof that it was possible for women writers to overcome gender bias in the literary sphere, now it appeared that Eliot was simply exempt from those prejudices, and Woolson's confidence as a literary artist was shaken.

This chapter will show that Woolson's perceptions of Eliot had a direct bearing on her sense of identity as a writer, and that to understand her development as an author, we need to trace the development of her relationship with Eliot. Prior to her departure for Europe in 1879, Woolson was preoccupied with trying to reconcile the antebellum ideal of self-sacrificing femininity with the exercise of female intellect and creativity. Following in Eliot's footsteps, she articulates these ideas through the figure of the reading woman, and in doing so, attempts to construct an artistic ideal to which she could aspire. This ideal corresponds to Eliot's androgynous model, an artist who exhibits a combination of gendered traits. After Woolson emigrated to Europe, the revelations about Eliot's personal life shook her

confidence as an author, causing her anxieties to be brought to the surface of her writing. As a result, we see a new trend in Woolson's fiction: whereas her early fiction written in America addresses the issue of female authorship indirectly through the figure of the reading woman, in her European phase of writing, we tend to find the female artist represented explicitly in her stories, women who are humiliated and crushed by male critical verdicts.

Constance Fenimore Woolson is an author who spans numerous divides, stylistic, geographical and temporal, a transitional writer in many senses of the word who was, I would argue, looking for a point of reference in a period of instability. She wrote short stories, novels, and poems, and in her time she was both a commercial and critical success. Neither modern nor contemporary critics have been able to assign her work to a uniform genre: she has been described as the great-niece and literary heir of the historical romance writer James Fenimore Cooper; a writer of 'local color,' a realist; a domestic novelist; a sentimentalist; a 'popular' and a 'serious' writer. Woolson was something of a nomad, and travelled extensively around the northern and southern states before departing to Europe in 1879, living primarily in Florence and Venice. She spent the remaining fifteen years of her life travelling in Europe, dying in 1894 after falling or jumping from her balcony in Venice after a prolonged period of illness. She is famous for writing about the Great Lakes region in North America as well as the Reconstruction South, where she stayed with her invalid mother from 1873 to 1879.³ She has been cited as an influential figure in opening the pages of *Harper's* magazine to Southern writers in an era when Northern magazines were regarded by Southerners as 'distinctly hostile' to Southern artists.⁴ From 1879, her writing often focussed on American expatriates living on the Continent.

Most importantly for this study, Woolson was also a writer caught between two eras. She began publishing fiction in 1873, nearly ten years after the Civil War (1861-1865) had destabilised ideas about women's social role, and with it, ideas about what and how women should write. Woolson was part of a generation of female authors who were struggling to define themselves in this climate, caught between the upheaval of the war and the 'New Woman' fiction that came about in the 1880s and 1890s, and their fiction bears the marks of their struggle for a literary identity. (This instability accounts, in part, for Woolson's desire to emulate Eliot.) The sense of dislocation felt by American women writers at this time was fuelled by two opposing movements which were specific to the American literary scene. As

³ Karen Weekes, 'Northern Bias in Constance Fenimore Woolson's *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 32 (2000), 102-15, p. 102.

⁴ Cheryl B. Torsney, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Grief of Artistry* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 5.

we saw in Chapter One, around 1870, American critics were preoccupied with the influx of women into the literary marketplace, and many commentators were growing increasingly anxious about their influence on literary culture. This influx, combined with the upheaval of the Civil War, brought with it new thinking about female authorship which gave women writers the status of artist and made female literary ambition a more acceptable trait. Consequently, patriarchal commentators were driven to defend what they deemed superior forms of literary art as a male province.⁵ Particular to the time Woolson was writing was the centrality of scale and social value in literary criticism, and a movement by sexist commentators to reinforce antebellum ideals about femininity through their evaluations of female authorship. The influence of European art critics such as Léon Lagrange, a recognised ‘authority’ whose arguments about female artistry were frequently alluded to in American art criticism, were central figures in this.⁶ In 1860, Lagrange wrote:

Male genius has nothing to fear from female taste. Let men of genius conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculpture, and elevated forms of painting. In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of art they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits, or miniatures. Or the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves. To women above all falls the practice of the graphic art, those painstaking arts which correspond so well to the role of abnegation and devotion which the honest woman happily fills here on earth, and which is her religion.⁷

For Lagrange, the division between male and female art rests on ideas of scale and purpose. Masculine art is vast, technical, and, like the architectural projects Lagrange speaks of, engaged with public life and the wider world of ideas. Feminine art, like its makers, is smaller, decorative and modest, beautiful but socially useless and disengaged from the world beyond the home. Moreover, whilst masculine art seems to be prompted by social forces – by civic need or as an intellectual response to contemporary thought – women’s art is taken up as a question of preference and therefore becomes a more self-centred form of artistic expression. Feminine art is the product of whim, or emotion. It is also, in accordance with the antebellum ideal of self-sacrificing femininity, self-effacing and modest, an expression of a woman’s ‘abnegation and devotion.’

⁵ See also Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 3-4.

⁶ Lagrange’s ideas were so prevalent that one American art journal, *The Crayon*, published a reprise of his essay ‘Du rang des femmes dans l’art’ in English for the benefit of non-French speakers following the year of its publication in France. See ‘Woman’s Position in Art’, *The Crayon*, 8 (1861), 25-28, p. 25.

⁷ ‘Du rang des femmes dans l’art’, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1860, trans. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 13.

It is evident from Woolson's literary reception that these ideas had infiltrated deeply into prevailing modes of thought in some American artistic circles. Where ideas about gender inform critics' evaluations of Woolson's work, we find that she is praised for the comprehensive, realistic 'masculine' qualities of her literature and criticised for the narrow, unrealistic, emotionally-driven 'feminine' elements. Woolson's positive reception can partly be accounted for by the nationalist feeling in America at this time, which meant that 'local color' fiction was favourably reviewed, hence the particular focus on her ability to depict location.⁸ *East Angels* in particular was praised for its 'fine and trustworthy picture of Florida.'⁹ Praising both her realism and her psychological portraits, *Century Magazine* noted in 1882 Woolson's 'unusual insight into the human heart' and evoked her ability to describe a scene so that it 'stands before one as if in a photograph' in her novel *Anne*.¹⁰ One reviewer was so impressed with *Anne* that he or she wrote that '[i]f Miss Woolson has stood easily at the head of American women novelists, it is less because she has given us the best, than because she has given us little but the best.'¹¹ A writer for the *New York Times* enthused about her short stories, describing them as 'charming, clean, clear-cut and strong in characterization and local colour [...] The world of fiction certainly sustained a great loss when this talented writer laid down her pen.'¹²

Whilst Woolson was for the most part lauded by her critics, praise of her writing was often qualified with claims that, as per the female artistry that Lagrange describes, it was limited, small scale and had no broad intellectual, social or political significance. Whilst the critics referenced above praised Woolson for the detailed settings in her novels, which were a mark of skilled 'masculine' realism, many other faulted her for her 'feminine' preoccupation with 'local detail': Woolson's 'American inventiveness,' one review stated, did not extend to plot, but rather to 'locality,' which she described with 'the utmost particularity as to details.' The article also commended her for consistently producing works which 'combine[d] the

⁸ As Richard Brodhead notes, rather than a 'cultural elegy,' 'local color' or 'regional' fiction 'turn[ed] local cultures into a history of their supersession by a modern order now risen to national dominance.' In this way, 'local color' writers were seen to be reaffirming the American national identity and their works were often greeted warmly by literary critics. See Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 120-1.

⁹ 'Review of *East Angels*', *Dial*, 7 (1886-1887), 66-7, p. 67.

¹⁰ 'Miss Woolson's "Anne"', *Century Magazine*, 24 (Aug. 1882), 635-6, pp. 635-6. *Anne* was the work that cemented Woolson's reputation amongst critics. It was the most popular serial in Harper's history, surpassed in sales only by George de Maurier ten years later. The publishers were so impressed with sales of the work that they proposed to give Woolson royalties for the book which had been excluded from her original contract. Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and his Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 169.

¹¹ 'Review of *Anne*', *Critic*, 2 (July 1882), 187-8, p. 187.

¹² Excerpt from the *New York Times Saturday Review* [n.d.] in Clare Benedict, ed., *Constance Fenimore Woolson*. 3 vols. Vol. 2, *Five Generations* (London: G. White, 1930), p. 556.

elements so sought after by publishers – freshness and popularity,’ implying that they lacked the intellectual weight and complexity that would alienate a broader, more lowbrow audience.¹³

The concept of female art being dislocated from the real world featured heavily in Woolson’s negative reviews. *The Critic* faulted her for portraying ‘melodramatic clap-trap of the cheapest variety,’ an ‘artistic mistake’ ‘so colossal, so incongruous, so incredible, that we [were] not merely disappointed; we laugh[ed].’¹⁴ Woolson’s portraits of men were often highlighted as being unrealistic, with Paul Tennant of *Jupiter Lights* dubbed ‘one of those curious “women’s-men” at whom the masculine critic can only smile.’¹⁵ Though Henry James stopped short of laughing, he readily presented Woolson as an author of fanciful, meaningless sentiment. ‘She likes the unmarried,’ he wrote, ‘but she likes marriages even better, and sometimes hurries them forward in advance of the reader’s forecast.’ For Woolson, the life of a woman was essentially ‘an affair of private relations,’ and ‘it would never occur to her to lend her voice to the plea of further exposure – for a revolution which should place her sex in the thick of the struggle for power.’¹⁶ That her writing could bear any reflection on the social struggles of women was apparently beyond Woolson’s scope.

In light of the bias against female writers in these branches of American literary criticism, and the sense of dislocation and instability that female authors were subject to at this time, it is not surprising that Woolson should be seeking successful female authors on whom to model herself. The most important literary role model for Woolson, the writer with whom she strongly identified and whose writing had the most profound impact on her own fiction, was George Eliot.

But Eliot was a complex figure in contemporary literary criticism. She was frequently masculinised by American literary commentators, and this would prove problematic for Woolson: whilst they did not always agree on why she was accorded such a high status, the general consensus amongst American commentators was that Eliot was a highbrow literary artist, equal if not superior to canonical male writers. George Willis Cooke, for example, lauded Eliot for her ability to create character, writing that ‘[s]he has in this regard the genius of Scott and Hugo’ and that she resembled Robert Browning ‘[i]n her strong tendency to psychologic analysis.’ In his biography of Eliot, Mayo Williamson Hazeltine compared Eliot to Balzac for her ‘exhaustive picture[s] of contemporary life,’ a place occupied by ‘no other

¹³ ‘Miss Woolson’s “Anne”’, p. 635.

¹⁴ ‘Review of *Anne*’, p. 187.

¹⁵ ‘Review of *Jupiter Lights*’, *Literary World*, 21 (Jan. 1890), 41, p. 41.

¹⁶ Henry James, ‘Miss Woolson’, in *Benedict*, pp. 6, 14, 1.

English author.'¹⁷ In these two biographies alone, Eliot is also compared to Daudet, Henry James, William Howells, Dickens, Thackeray, Henry Fielding, and Goethe.¹⁸ Edward Eggleston claimed that Eliot had singlehandedly prompted the literary world to re-evaluate its notion of the novel, and compared her impact on the genre to that of Shakespeare on drama.¹⁹

Many critics who accorded Eliot this high status felt compelled to account for the fact that Eliot was a woman, as traditionally this should have prohibited her from achieving such a high standard of writing. If Eliot was regarded by these critics as the most accomplished author of her time, it was because they had singled her out as an exception to her sex who should be praised for having transcended her gender and produced masculine literary art. Precisely how she had transcended it was open for debate amongst contemporary commentators, who evoked the intellectual content of her fiction, her realism, her technical prowess, her broad outlook, her genius, her ability to depict male characters, her imagination, her strength, her comprehensiveness, and, frequently, her superiority to other female writers by way of explanation for the quality of her art.

In 1873, for instance, the *Southern Review* declared that Eliot 'has no superior, we had almost said no peer, in her own province, among living artists,' explaining that her intellectual capabilities were 'so far above ordinary womanhood as to include the strength and grasp, the critical acumen and large outlook of a man.'²⁰ It identified her portraits of 'genuine, manly' male characters as a point of distinction from her female colleagues whose imagination, it was seen, lacked the scope to envision something so foreign to them as masculinity, adding that 'the world ha[d] seen almost no creative mind among women.'²¹ In a similar vein, Bayard Tuckerman noted in 1882 that '[w]omen almost invariably leave the stamp of their sex upon their work [...] But George Eliot took and held a man's position in literature from the outset of her career [...] in breadth of conception, in comprehensiveness of thought her mind was essentially masculine.'²²

In this way, critics not only emphasised that Eliot was an exception to her sex, but that she was the exception that proved the rule. In 1886, essayist Abba Goold Woolson²³ qualified

¹⁷ George Willis Cooke, *George Eliot: A Critical Study of her Life, Writings and Philosophy* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883), pp. 120, 125; Mayo Williamson Hazeltine, *Chats about Books: Poets and Novelists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), p. 6.

¹⁸ Cooke, pp. 109, 126; Hazeltine, pp. 2-3, 5-6.

¹⁹ Edward Eggleston, 'George Eliot and the Novel', in *Essays from "The Critic"* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1882), pp. 50-3.

²⁰ 'The Genius of George Eliot', p. 208.

²¹ 'The Genius of George Eliot', pp. 205-6.

²² Bayard Tuckerman, *A History of English Prose Fiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1882), p. 288.

²³ A distant relative of Constance Fenimore Woolson by marriage.

her praise of Eliot's 'masculine' writing with the assertion that '[t]he long list of British authors presents the name of no other woman who holds in any department the first rank [...]. Even the writings of Madame de Staël had not sufficed to show that such a combination of qualities could find a place in a woman's brain.'²⁴ Mayo Williamson Hazeltine prefaced his praise of Eliot with the claim that Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Staël and Jane Austen had provided 'clever letters,' 'shrewd reflections on life and books,' and 'character sketches carefully drawn,' but had failed to '[show] themselves competent to execute an elaborate and comprehensive work of art.' He added that 'Charlotte Brontë was but a precursor of George Eliot, and can only be said to have demonstrated that a great female novelist was a possibility.'²⁵

Eliot, then, occupied a unique place in debates about female authorship. She was an icon who at once embodied the prejudices against women writers in the literary marketplace, whilst at the same time demonstrating that it was possible to overcome them. In Eliot, Woolson found a literary role model who addressed and validated her anxieties about the compatibility of her gender and vocation but who also represented the possibility – until 1879 at least – that Woolson could, in spite of critical bias towards male writers, gain recognition from the literary sphere as one of the foremost writers in the English language.

Eliot's impact on Woolson's fiction can be traced throughout her writing career. Prior to her departure for Europe in 1879, it is apparent that Woolson's attitude towards Eliot was one of almost unbridled admiration, and that she identified with and wished to emulate the writer. Whilst Woolson writes less about Eliot in her European phase of writing, presumably because of the revelations about her private life, there is evidence that this emulation continued, albeit to a lesser degree, after 1879. Throughout her career, Woolson frequently commented on Eliot and her work in her letters, dubbing Eliot her favourite author and *The Mill on the Floss* her favourite novel.²⁶ A letter written in 1873 indicates she had read *Adam Bede*, and it appears to have had a considerable impact on Woolson, becoming a model for her own work: she writes that she wishes to emulate the strength and fearlessness (traits deemed masculine in contemporary literary criticism) of that 'great book,' avowing that she would rather her writing were more 'strong than beautiful, or even good;' "'pretty,'" "sweet" writing' inspired 'horror' in her.²⁷ (She later reworked Eliot's novel in *East Angels*, published

²⁴ Abba Goold Woolson, *George Eliot and her Heroines* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1886), pp. 41, 44.

²⁵ Hazeltine, p. 2.

²⁶ Letter to Paul Hamilton Hayne, All Saint's Say [1875], in J. B. Hubbell, 'Some New Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson', *New England Quarterly*, 14 (1941), 715-35, p. 724.

²⁷ Letter to Mrs. Washburn, [n.d.], in Benedict, p. 20.

in 1886.) However it was *The Mill on the Floss* that had the most profound impact on Woolson's writing. We see the heroine Maggie Tulliver reworked throughout her writing career, namely in 'The Flower of the Snow' (1874), 'Jeannette' (1874), *Anne* (1880) and 'The Street of the Hyacinth' (1882). Woolson cites an appreciation of *Middlemarch* as the mark of a cultivated reader in 1876,²⁸ and in 1882, she is full of praise for Eliot's final novel *Daniel Deronda*, particularly the character of Grandcourt whom she describes as a 'finished creation,' 'distinct,' 'finely detestable; and haunting, and suffocating' (though she does fault Eliot for conveniently having him die at the end of the novel – an ending which she refused for her heroine Margaret who remains trapped in her unhappy marriage at the end of *East Angels*).²⁹ After Eliot's death in 1880, Woolson mentions having read her letters and journals,³⁰ and her comments in her letter to Emily Vernon Clarke, quoted at the start of the chapter, suggest that she had access to the tributes and biographies of Eliot that were published shortly after her passing.

Woolson's most revealing comments about Eliot, and how she impacted on her ideas about her artistic identity and the relationship between gender and artistry, come in the form of a sonnet. Entitled 'To George Eliot,' this poem was written by Woolson in 1876 and was published in the *New Century for Women*, a journal supporting female suffrage:

O wondrous woman! Shaping with thy pen
 As Michael Angelo did shape from stone,
 Colossal forms of clear-cut outline, when
 We dwell upon thy pages, not alone
 The beauty of thy rose, we see, as finely traced
 As roses drawn by other woman-hands
 Who spend their lives in shaping them, but faced
 We find ourselves with giant's work, that stands
 Above us as a mountain lifts its brow,
 Grand, unapproachable, yet clear in view
 To lowliest eyes that upward look. O, how
 Hast thou shed radiance as thy finger drew
 Its shapes! A myriad women light have seen,
 And courage taken, because *thou* hast been!³¹

Two important things are happening in this poem. The first is the clear attempt to unite the two gendered forms of art that Léon Lagrange delineated in 1860. Eliot excels in both

²⁸ Letter to Paul Hamilton Hayne, Jan. 16 1876, in Benedict, p. 728.

²⁹ Letter to Henry James, Feb. 12 1882, in Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Letters*. Vol. III 1883-1895 (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 532.

³⁰ Letter to J.L. and J. B. Gilder, [n.d.], in Benedict, p. 31.

³¹ Constance Fenimore Woolson, 'To George Eliot', in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets*, ed. Paula Bernat Bennett (Cornwall: Blackwell, 1998), p. 458.

categories, combining the feminine intricate detail of the ‘finely traced,’ beautiful rose (like the decorative ‘painting of flowers’ in the Lagrange excerpt, a ‘graphic’ art) with the broad perspective and all-encompassing masculine vastness of the ‘colossal,’ ‘clear-cut’ mountain (‘architectural sculpture,’ ‘monumental’).

The second is more interesting. Implicit within this praise of Eliot is an endorsement of the hierarchical gendered categories of artistry Lagrange evokes. Tellingly, the women writers inspired by Eliot’s example remain grounded, cut off from the masculine heights of the mountain. As their ‘upward look’ suggests, they aspire to emulate such complexity and breadth in their own art; they aspire to follow Eliot’s example, this female Michael Angelo, and transcend the limits of their gender. It would seem, however, that in spite of the ‘myriad women’ Eliot has given ‘courage,’ her achievement of uniting masculine and feminine artistic elements continues to elude subsequent female authors. To these women, Eliot and her works remain an ‘unapproachable’ ‘light.’

We can see from this sonnet that Eliot represented something ambivalent for Woolson. Evidently Woolson was anxious that she would never live up to Eliot’s artistic success, and that she, like the female writers in the sonnet, was cut off from Eliot’s masculine heights. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that before 1879 at least, Woolson still believed that following in Eliot’s footsteps was a possibility.

If we look again at Woolson’s letter to Emily Vernon Clarke, the language she uses suggests that she has been disillusioned on this point. In the letter, Woolson picks up on and insists on the idea, which was made repeatedly in the biographies and testimonies that were published after Eliot’s death, that Eliot was an exception to the rule that superior forms of authorship were incompatible with femininity, and that she was not judged according to the criteria that other female authors were judged. Eliot’s death saw a new trend in critical attitudes towards the author, with many commentators characterising her in a way that was strongly redolent of the antebellum ideal of femininity – a profoundly moral, maternal, modest, loving and much loved woman. Assertions of her morality and her genius were either accompanied by the claim that the ‘errors’ of the author’s life had no bearing on the value of her fiction,³² or, more commonly, it was argued that the profound morality in her novels proved that Eliot’s relationship with Lewes could not have been wrong; it had been a breach

³² Charles Gordon Ames, *George Eliot's Two Marriages* (Philadelphia: Arnold & Co., 1886), pp. 5-6; George W. E. Russell, 'George Eliot: Her Genius and Writings', (London: H. G. Fisher, 1882), p. 52.

of civil, but not moral law.³³ Some writers explicitly presented Eliot as a silent, suffering martyr figure, and a loving wife and mother to Lewes and his children, particularly to Thornton whom she nursed as he was dying, and chose to play down the issue of her cohabitation.³⁴ Where charges of immorality were not ignored or brushed aside, they were simply denied. To Woolson, it seemed that neither Eliot's behaviour, which by contemporary standards was unfeminine, nor the fact that she was a woman, presented any obstacle to her success as a literary artist. In short, Eliot had never had to overcome the obstacles that Woolson faced as a female author.

This chapter now seeks to substantiate the claim that Woolson emulated Eliot in her fiction, and shows that this emulation revolves around the issue of female authorship, which, like Eliot, Woolson discusses using the figure of the female reader. It takes the example of Garda Thorne in *East Angels* (1886), a character who is based on Eliot's Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*.

Woolson's Socially-Empowered Female Reader-Author

In her fictional representations of reading, Woolson shifts the focus away from Eliot's humanism onto a more polemical arena, bluntly conveying how the exclusion of women by the literary establishment – which in Woolson's fiction is a reductive portrayal of the literary world, comprised of prejudiced male thinkers – disempowers women on a wide social scale. Woolson's anxiety about the compatibility of her gender and her authorship is generally closer to the surface of her writing than Eliot's, and so her representations of reading tend to bring the social implications of female literary engagement to the fore.

As we saw in the previous chapter, in *Adam Bede*, to fail to read is to allow oneself to be defined by patriarchal ideology; conversely to read is to symbolically write oneself outside the bounds of that ideology. To judge from *East Angels*, Woolson's reworking of *Adam Bede*, Woolson understood this message very clearly. She also understood the links Eliot was making between reading, authorship and one's social identity, as she explicitly links reading and authorship in her novel. Woolson signals to the reader that her fictional female readers can be read as representatives of the female author, thus opening up a debate about female authorship in her narrative.

³³ Cooke, p. 254; Ames, p. 14; Abba Goold Woolson, *George Eliot and her Heroines*, pp. 134ff; Blind, pp. 119-20.

³⁴ See Blind, pp. 119-20; Cooke, p. 48; Ames, pp. 19-22.

Like Eliot's Hetty Sorrel, Garda Thorne, a spoiled, sheltered, orphaned girl who is sixteen at the start of *East Angels*, is insistently described as a beautiful child, a 'simple girl' who enjoys the pleasures of 'simple things' such as honey-cake, oranges and roses.³⁵ She meets her lover secretly in the woods as Hetty does with Arthur in *Adam Bede*, and whilst unlike Hetty she ultimately marries that lover, Garda demonstrates a lack of empathy comparable with Hetty's in her indifference towards Evert Winthrop, the Adam Bede figure who is in love with her. Her emotional immaturity is also signalled in her reaction to her husband's death at the close of the novel; her suffering is compared by the narrator to something 'physical,' which she claims she wishes to 'forget,' not understanding why she should continue to suffer after his passing (266, 568).

Garda's experience with literature is also comparable to Hetty's. She has insufficient experience of literature to contradict or even have an opinion on the idea espoused by Dr. Kirby that no woman after Fanny Burney, a woman Garda thinks of vaguely as a 'celebrated historical character,' 'wr[ote] anything worth [...] reading' (31). The only other instance where she is associated with literature is when she uses volumes of Henry Fielding as a footstool late in the novel (574). Garda's lack of exposure to or interest in literature leaves her 'in complete ignorance' '[a]s regards any knowledge of the world' (38). Lacking experience either in the public sphere or garnered vicariously through reading, she is unaware of the rules determining her status as a woman within her community. Child-like, she unthinkingly pursues what she desires with no heed of the consequences, naively asserting that people 'should[n't] be ashamed of [their] real feelings,' an attitude which, as Margaret warns (and Hetty Sorrel demonstrates through her pregnancy in *Adam Bede*), is especially perilous for a woman (346). Having never 'troubled herself to evolve anything, to think much of any world, good or bad, outside of her own personality,'

[h]er knowledge of the world outside was – must be – confined to the Spanish-tinted legends of the slumberous little community, to the limited traditions of her mother's small experience, and to the perceptions and fancies of her own imagination; these last, however numerous they might be in themselves, however vivid, must leave her much in the condition of *a would-be writer of dramas who has never read a play nor seen one acted, but has merely evolved something vaguely resembling one from the dreaming depths of his own consciousness*; Garda's idea of the world beyond the barrens must be equally vague and unreal. (23, my italics)

³⁵ Constance Fenimore Woolson, *East Angels* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1886), p. 266. Further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

In this excerpt, narrated from the point of view of Evert Winthrop who, not coincidentally, is a male character, Woolson's narrative quite clearly compares the poorly-read Garda to an inexperienced, or perhaps uneducated writer. Here, Woolson is highlighting the links between women's limited social experience and what was pejoratively termed feminine authorship. Either as a stereotypically substandard feminine author or a woman ignorant about society and literature, Garda is vulnerable to being dismissed and defined by men like Winthrop. In this excerpt, which forms part of Winthrop's early impressions of Garda, he describes her hypothetical authorship as passive, romantic, and therefore feminine. The whole paragraph is saturated with language that was associated with female writing in literary criticism, evoking narrowness and limitation ('confined,' 'little,' 'limited,' 'small') and the fanciful ideals of women who have no experience of the real world ('vague,' 'fancies,' 'imagination,' 'dreaming,' 'unreal'). The weakness of form and structure that were seen to be characteristic of women's fiction is recalled in the 'evol[ution of] something vaguely resembling' a play, and the reference to 'the dreaming depths' of the playwright's consciousness evokes the idealism, and perhaps also the narcissism, deemed characteristic of female authorship.

Failing to understand that her identity within her society is circumscribed by her gender, it follows that Garda cannot define an identity outside of those confines, and leaves herself vulnerable to being defined by others. Winthrop has no concept of Garda as a desiring subject, seeing her as a blank slate onto which to project his own ideas and desires; he thinks of her as 'a princess in a fairytale – one of those who have always lived mysteriously imprisoned in a tower' (24). He becomes the author, she his literary creation. For Garda's opinions, Winthrop '[does] not care;' rather, what attracts him is the fact that 'she has never analysed herself, nor anything else' (118). Later in the novel, he also attempts to impose his ideas about Garda's identity onto her through books: 'the only thing you tried to do was to 'mould' me,' she tells him. '[Y]ou made me read things [...] You have had an idea of me from the first [...] you never took the trouble to study me, myself [...] Your Idea would have been willing to be moulded; and she would have read everything you suggested' (394). To have surrendered her reading choices to Winthrop would have been tantamount to surrendering her very identity to him.

Throughout Woolson's career, we see repeated attempts to envisage a positive alternative to Garda, the ideal female reader-author in whom masculine and feminine authorship are united, and a model to which Woolson herself could aspire. As previously discussed, these attempts can be divided roughly into two phases, her early writing in America and her later writing in Europe. Whilst her early phase of writing is more optimistic

about female authorship overall, her representations of female readers and artists in both phases are problematic in their own way. Whilst in the second phase, female artists and intellectuals are violently humiliated and crushed, in the first, the female reader-author is often undercut by an antebellum ideal of self-sacrificing femininity which Woolson endorses at the expense of her characters' intellectual and artistic qualities. We now look at examples both prior to and after Woolson's departure for Europe, and how she deals with the dilemma facing the female author in these works.

Woolson's Educated Female Reader

Woolson's early fiction in particular is characterised by a need to dispel the myth that a woman would be de-sexed or de-feminised by a rigorous education and, implicitly, by writing literature. Her portraits of educated, well-read female characters often appear to be designed to demonstrate that they have been improved by their education. However, it is the precise nature of the improvement of Woolson's female readers that problematises her response to this issue. In *Anne* (1880) and later in *East Angels* (1886), Woolson reiterates Eliot's argument for an androgynous approach to literature for women, claiming that her female readers are morally improved by their education. However, this moral improvement goes hand in hand with other qualities which recall an antebellum ideal of femininity, an ideal which excludes so-called masculine thinking.

Let us start with *Anne*. In this novel, Woolson makes the strongest case for women's access to masculine learning through her intellectual heroine, but undercuts this idea at the close of her narrative by ultimately characterising Anne as a woman of intuition who cannot engage with a range of masculine discourses. *Anne* (completed in 1878, serialised from 1880)³⁶ is a coming of age story. The main plot of the novel is the resolution of a love triangle between Anne, her selfish betrothed Erastus, and a man she falls in love with later in the novel, Ward Heathcote, who is falsely accused of murder. With Anne's help, he is acquitted, and they marry at the close of the narrative. The first section of the novel is of particular interest to us, as this details how Anne is educated and focuses on her private reading. It is also the section which bears the strongest resemblance to Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. If *The Mill on the Floss* presents a woman who is destroyed by her culture's attitudes towards female education, then *Anne* asks what might have happened to Eliot's heroine if her intellectual energies had not been entirely stifled. Like the young wayward Maggie with her

³⁶ Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, p. 169.

dirty pinafore and unruly hair, Anne's strong arms, large hands, 'big' frame and heavy hair which seems to 'def[y] restraint' all mark her out as an unconventional girl in whom '[t]he usual ideal of pretty, slender, unformed maidenhood was not realized.'³⁷ Woolson clearly understood that these physical details are symptomatic of Maggie's 'unfeminine' intellectual capabilities in *The Mill on the Floss*: she makes a pointed reference to Anne's heavy braids breaking away from the coil at the back of her head as she reads *Hamlet* (43).

At the start of the novel, Anne is emphatically a thinking heroine: she translates Livy and Cicero, and likes the 'exactness' of Latin (42). However, like Maggie, she remains subject to the double standards of her age with regard to her education. The double standards at work in the school room in Eliot's novel are presented more pointedly in *Anne*. It is apparent that the heroine's natural flair for intellectually-heavy, masculine works, which include Shakespeare, Latin, algebra and astronomy, is no threat to her feminine virtues – Woolson often presents Anne in a domestic setting, taking on a maternal role with her younger siblings – yet her intellectual leanings are discouraged throughout the novel. Her father, fearing it should make a 'blue-stocking of her,' does not permit her to learn Greek, explaining that it is his 'duty to keep her from making herself positively unattractive.' After all, who could 'fall in love [...] with a girl who understood Greek?' Meanwhile, her former classmate Erastus, the Tom Tulliver of Woolson's novel, who has been sent to college for the further education also denied to Anne, casually 'drop[s] in to read a little Greek with his older master' (42-4); Anne, the more scholarly of the two, is confined within the domestic sphere, left to look after her family and the home.

Whereas Maggie responds to this injustice by losing herself in romance novels and imbibing messages that conflict with her sense of social duty, Anne responds by engaging creatively with the plays of Shakespeare. Like Maggie, who takes refuge in the Red Deeps to exchange literature with Philip Wakem, Anne escapes into the forest, but in her case, to recite speeches from Shakespeare's plays.

[Anne] could identify herself with [the characters] so completely, throw herself into the bodies and minds she had constructed for them so entirely, that the effect was startling, and all the more so because her conceptions of the characters were girlish and utterly different from those that have ruled the dramatic stage for generations. Her ideas of Juliet, of Ophelia, of Rosalind, and Cleopatra were her own. (62-3)

³⁷ Constance Fenimore Woolson, *Anne* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), pp. 2-3, 43. Further references will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

For Anne, literature becomes an avenue into a symbolic form of female authorship and independent self-definition. In place of the interpretations which have traditionally 'ruled the dramatic stage,' Anne's own creative (mis)reading allows her to explore different facets of her own identity through the medium of the text. As Barbara Sicherman puts it, women in late Victorian America 'not only read themselves into texts,' but 'reading became a staging ground for rehearsing future selves.'³⁸ Anne's creative engagement with Shakespeare's plays demonstrates how active '[r]eading provided space – physical, temporal, and psychological – that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations,' a place where women might produce 'a counterplot to patriarchal law,' and in which female desire was allowed to become "public."³⁹

Having described this ideal female reader-artist, it appears that Woolson is intent on proving to the reader that the cultivation of a woman's intelligence and creativity would render her a shining example of moral womanhood. However, in elevating her, Woolson constructs Anne according to an antebellum ideal of femininity which prohibits her from having an intellectual identity, and thus she undermines the original feminist purport of the novel. She does this primarily by endorsing contemporary associations between women and the irrational. Articulating the general feeling of his time, C. C. Everett wrote in 1857 that

while man requires that his religion rest upon a solid basis of argument and philosophy, that of woman is more often the immediate apprehension of a loving faith [...] Her affections and emotions are more powerful than those of man, and can thus be less easily untwined from the objects to which they cling.⁴⁰

If Anne begins the novel as a practical, sure-footed young woman who delights in the logic of Latin, she ends it as one driven by feeling. Near the end of the novel, Ward Heathcote is saved from being sentenced for a murder he did not commit thanks to Anne's unwavering faith in him, faith, according to Woolson's narrative, being an intrinsically feminine trait: '[t]hose who did believe [Heathcote was guilty] were almost all men; those who did not, almost all women; the exceptions being [...] a few women who, having logical minds, stood by the evidence in spite of themselves' (451).

Some critics such as Anne E. Boyd have presented this undercutting as a feminist assertion on Woolson's part, citing a technique adopted by some contemporary female commentators who privileged feminine feeling over masculine logic. This school of thought

³⁸ Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition', p. 78.

³⁹ Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility', p. 202; Elam, pp. 127, 139.

⁴⁰ Everett, pp. 416-7.

promoted female intellectual capabilities on moral grounds, arguing that the feminine mind was more akin to genius because of its intuitive nature, thereby insisting that women were intellectually better suited to creating art.⁴¹ Championing the idea of sexual difference, '[t]he mind of man,' wrote humanitarian and essayist Sarah E. Henshaw in 1869, 'moves analytically – that of slow and sometimes devious way of reasoning, and reaches it by degrees of approximation,' whereas woman 'darts upon hers at once, is sure of it instantly, she does now know how, and *afterward* seeks to prove it.' Woman's faculty is 'of a higher order' which 'does not stop to touch, and taste, and handle, in its endeavor after truth, but "sweeps" at once to its goal.'⁴² Anne emulates this in her dismissal of all rational approaches in favour of the 'feminine' 'sixth sense' (524): 'We should follow no track, and accept no beginning,' she states, 'save the immovable certainty that [Heathcote] is innocent [...] it is said that women divine a truth sometimes by intuition, and against all probability. It is to this instinct – if such there be – that we must trust now' (491).

Woolson inverts the hierarchy but nonetheless endorses the gendered categories that prevailed in misogynistic literary criticism. As a result, *Anne* endorses the exclusion of women from the highest echelons of the literary world, and on a broader scale, the public sphere. Reading reports of the case, Anne is 'not skilful enough to extract the real evidence from the mass of irrelevant testimony with which it was surrounded' and finds the lawyers' lines of questioning 'as far from the real subject as a blade of grass' 'from the fixed stars' (452). Carried away by intuition, Anne becomes dislocated from journalistic and legal discourse; no longer capable of engaging with intellectually heavy material as she did as a student, she reverts to 'the world of romance,' to blades of grass and stars, which, according to C. C. Everett, was the only real world women knew,⁴³ and resigns herself to the sidelines.

Woolson makes another significant attempt at undermining the anxieties manifest in *Anne* in a portrait of an educated female reader in her 1886 novel *East Angels*. However, unlike Anne, who relinquishes her academic leanings and is rewarded for it with marriage, in this novel, the female reader-author also conforms to a more conventional idea of womanhood by the close of her narrative, but is punished. This, I would suggest, can be accounted for by the revelations about Eliot's personal life that so disturbed Woolson after she left for Europe in 1879. As the following discussion will show, this is symptomatic of a new, darker trend in Woolson's approach to the dilemma facing the female author.

⁴¹ Boyd, pp. 133-4.

⁴² Sarah E. Henshaw, 'Are We Inferior?', *Galaxy*, 7 (1869), pp. 126, 129.

⁴³ Everett, p. 418.

In this novel, Woolson is even more insistent about her heroine's identity as a woman of intellect than she was in *Anne*: Margaret Harold is identified as 'intelligent and cultivated,' a reader of Emerson and Milton, a combination of Margaret Fuller and Madame de Staël (100). Unlike other women, one of whom dubs *Adam Bede* 'an easy-looking story that didn't seem exciting,' Margaret knows the value of Eliot's fiction over such popular works as Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (520-1).

Margaret is a feminist heroine: refusing to make herself accountable to any authority other than her own, she keeps her silence concerning the reasons behind the collapse of her marriage, resulting in Winthrop's initial summation of her as 'insufferable,' 'narrow mind[ed],' 'cold,' and 'conceit[ed],' 'a combination that made a woman (it was always a woman) simply odious' (136, 137-8). Refusing to allow male authorities to shape, or even judge her actions, she remains socially independent – but only to a point. As the narrative progresses, Margaret's awareness of prevalent patriarchal values is increasingly presented as a curse rather than a blessing, resulting in social tensions which she cannot resolve. 'I have always been alone,' she laments,

When have *I* been – permitted myself to be disagreeable? When have *I* ever failed to be kind? I have always repressed myself. What is the result? I have been at everybody's beck and call, I have been expected to bear everything in silence; to listen, always to listen, and never to reply. (497)

Rather than socially empowered, we have the strong sense that she feels victimised here. It is worthy of note that these remarks are delivered as Margaret writes, symbolically linking the restraints placed on her by her society with authorship.

The feminism in Woolson's portrait is also undermined by the masochistic strains Margaret displays late in the novel. Margaret's final, morally-determined concession results in devastation rather than compromise: she willingly perpetuates her own misery by choosing to remain with her self-centred husband, whose bleakly ironic words close the novel: 'Do you know that you've grown old, Madge, before your time? [...] Well – you're a good woman' (590-1). Female 'goodness' and masochism go hand in hand in the closing pages of *East Angels*. In her parting scene with Evert Winthrop, Margaret agrees that sometimes women have a 'terrible love of self-sacrifice' and '*like* to be tortured' (589). So overcome is Margaret with her love for Winthrop that she is unable to stand; she swoons and Winthrop lays her down, fearful of her fragile state (589-90). Margaret's decision to separate from Winthrop is also delivered in markedly passive terms: she can only appeal to him not to increase her pain

by seeking her out: 'that would make me die, to have you pursue me, ungenerously, brutally, when I have already such hard pain to bear' (590).

Significantly, Margaret is never again presented reading or writing after this point in the narrative. The last thing we see Margaret doing is embroidery, the small-scale art deemed feminine by critics like Léon Lagrange, silent save for an acknowledgement that she has grown old before her time (591). Early in the novel, Evert Winthrop asserts that 'no matter what Lanse had done [...] [Margaret's] duty as a wife [...] clearly was, and would to the end continue, to remain with her husband [...] that was what marriage meant' (137). The narrative takes pains to contradict Winthrop's initial estimation of Margaret as a 'narrow-mind[ed]' 'conceit[ed]' 'cold' woman, yet by the close of the work she herself endorses the ideal of unconditional submission he advocates, both in remaining faithful to her husband, and in exchanging her unconventional, 'masculine' intellect for the decorative, imitative art of embroidery.

Tellingly, it was for Margaret's 'exemplary' self-abnegation that critics lauded the novel.⁴⁴ In an 1886 review, one critic wrote:

when the nobility of [Margaret's] brave, indomitable spirit began to dawn upon us, we felt that here was a woman whom no appeals of passion would swerve one hair's breadth from rectitude. Renouncing the self, and knowing what desolation and heart-hunger must be her portion, she stands for the sanctity of the marriage obligation which she took upon herself, and holds it sacred, though her husband has set it at naught and made the bondage almost unbearable.⁴⁵

It should be noted at this point that the conversions women like Margaret and Anne undergo over the course of their narratives have been read as something more subversive than my reading allows. Some commentators studying nineteenth-century women's writing have emphasised that female authors were restricted in terms of what they could write if they wanted their work to be published, and so it was necessary to disguise what would be considered radical content under accepted convention. For Ann Douglas Wood, the sentimental heroine who appears in various guises in the latter parts of Woolson's narratives

⁴⁴ This self-abnegation has caused some difficulty in modern feminist criticism. Georgia Kreiger, for instance, condemns '[c]ritical reaction to Woolson's stubbornly self-sacrificial character' which 'has varied only minimally over a century,' agreeing with Joan Myers Weimer that Margaret's self-sacrifice is merely a 'vener' under which the heroine 'conceals her struggle for freedom and her rebellion against male authority.' Georgia Kreiger, 'East Angels: Constance Fenimore Woolson's Revision of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 22 (2005), 18-29, pp. 22-3. See also Joan Myers Weimer, 'Women Artists as Exiles in the Fiction of Constance Fenimore Woolson', *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 3 (1986), 3-15, p. xxiv.

⁴⁵ 'Review of *East Angels*', *Literary World*, 24 (July 1886), 243, p. 243.

is a façade 'under which the woman activist of the second half of the century was to battle for her rights.'⁴⁶ Susan K. Harris adds that

If a heroine creates an autonomous self and succeeds in impressing it on her society and her reader for six hundred pages, she has left convincing evidence that it can be done. The fact that she gives it all up upon marriage in the last twenty-five pages should have less of an impact on readers – especially readers themselves entertaining dreams of autonomy – than the fact that she succeeded.

Depending on how one is disposed to read Woolson's fiction, we can see the conclusion as a form of subterfuge which allows the radical messages about femininity she presents earlier in the work to be preserved, or else we can rest assured that these radical ideas are undermined or corrected by the close of the work.⁴⁷

However, with respect to Woolson I would question the degree to which her heroine's conversions are a form of subterfuge on the author's part, or a manifestation of Woolson's personal anxieties about the compatibility of her gender and her vocation. This becomes clearer in her later works of fiction. The humiliation of the female reader-author figure at the end of *East Angels* is central to the trend we see emerging in Woolson's fiction after her departure for Europe, most notably in her short stories, which deal explicitly with American female artists and their relationship with male authorities in the European art world. Here, we see her artistic anxieties rising to the surface of her writing in response to revelations about George Eliot's private life. In the violent humiliation and destruction of her female artists, Woolson both condemns and uneasily anticipates gender-based criticism of her own writing, repeatedly imagining the negative reception of her fiction. What is perhaps most worrying about these stories is the masochistic strain, as exhibited by Margaret in *East Angels*, which arises again and again in Woolson's portraits of female artists. It is to these stories that the discussion now turns.

Woolson's Female Artists Crushed

In three of Woolson's stories, 'Miss Grief' (1880), 'At the Chateau of Corinne' (1895) and 'The Street of the Hyacinth' (1887), the female artist (an author, and in the third story, a painter) is crushed, humiliated, and resigns herself to death or a more conventional form of femininity which does not involve artistry. In these works, Woolson dispenses with Eliot's

⁴⁶ Ann Douglas Wood, 'The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914', *Women's Studies*, 1 (1972), 3-45, p. 10.

⁴⁷ Susan K. Harris, "'But is it Any Good?": Evaluating Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction', *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 63 (1991), 43-61, pp. 48, 50.

reading woman and instead presents her female artists explicitly, bringing the relationship between gender and creativity that Eliot explores in her fiction sharply to the fore. In contrast to Eliot who almost but does not quite manage to combine 'masculine' and 'feminine' modes of authorship in characters like Dorothea Brooke, in Woolson's short stories there is little middle ground for her female artists. Each follows the same pattern, an exaggeration of the undercutting we see at the close of Eliot's narratives: the female artist's artwork is viewed by a male critic as being incompatible with her femininity; the artist then relinquishes her vocation or dies. Woolson's late stories are a defensive attack on the literary art world, painting an exaggerated portrait of an environment where the female artist cannot survive.

Through Woolson's use of the figure of the male art critic, these stories are emphatic in their presentation of the female artist as a victim of oppression by the male dominated art world. The narrator of 'Miss Grief,' an artist and literary critic, is described as a 'literary' man. He asks for a second opinion on Miss Grief's writing from two other literary authorities, an editor and a publisher, to assess Miss Grief's writing, both of whom dismiss it on the same grounds as the narrator.⁴⁸ The misogynist John Ford in 'At the Chateau of Corinne,' pointedly referred to as a 'critic,' regards female authorship as a sexual transgression and tears apart Katharine Winthrop's poetry.⁴⁹ In 'The Street of the Hyacinth,' Raymond Noel, who pronounces his opinion of Ettie Macks's painting as substandard, is 'an artist – that is, a literary one,' a 'fashionable man,' 'highly successful in his own field.'⁵⁰

Woolson's most famous short story, 'Miss Grief' (1880), presents the relationship between a female writer and the biased male critic in literal form. The narrator's presentation of Miss Grief indicates that Woolson conceived her with George Eliot in mind – we remember that she heard gossip about Eliot in London in 1879, so it is not implausible that she would have been preoccupied with the author whilst writing this story. Firstly, Miss Grief is 'unattractive, and more than middle-aged,' 'eccentric and unconventional' (9, 7), qualities associated with Eliot. More significantly, Miss Grief's writing is 'radian[t]' and 'unrestrained, large, vast, like the skies or the wind' (27, 33), recalling Woolson's sonnet which described Eliot's literature as a 'colossal' mountain and a source of 'light' to women.

⁴⁸ Constance Fenimore Woolson, "'Miss Grief'", in *Stories by American Authors* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), pp. 33, 30-1. Further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

⁴⁹ Constance Fenimore Woolson, 'At the Chateau of Corinne', *Harper's*, 75 (Oct. 1887), 778-96, p. 789. Further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

⁵⁰ Constance Fenimore Woolson, 'The Street of the Hyacinth', in *The Front Yard and Other Italian Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895), p. 156. Further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the body of the text in parentheses.

In view of Woolson's remarks about Eliot's 'petted' and 'happy' life, it is likely that her allusions to Eliot in her characterisation of Miss Grief were designed to demonstrate how conditions for women writers at this time were not conducive to the flourishing of female literary talent. This story asks what might have happened to Eliot if she had not been treated as an exception amongst female writers by literary critics.

Woolson suggests that Miss Grief is a superior artist. The narrator, initially doubtful as to the worth of her manuscript, concedes that he 'ought to go down on [his] knees before her, and entreat her to take her proper place of supremacy at once.' He recognises that she is 'a woman who possessed the divine spark of genius' (19). 'Genius' was an epithet frequently applied to Eliot in contemporary American literary criticism, particularly with regard to her most highly regarded novel *Middlemarch*. In spite of these indications of her talent, however, Miss Grief's writing is evaluated by the narrator according to patriarchal standards and thus judged critically. Whilst the narrator acknowledges what would have been deemed masculine qualities – he praises its 'original power' and 'vast[ness]' (19, 33) – ultimately, he is not convinced the work can be salvaged. It is flawed by its 'feminine' dislocation from reality and its disregard for formal conventions; it is 'fantastic,' 'dream[like],' marred by 'glaring impossibilities in the plot' and its 'faults of expression and structure' (22). Such is the narrator's arrogance that he tries to correct Miss Grief's manuscript himself, finally making the decision to abandon the project altogether and hide her literature away from the world. Miss Grief passes away, unknown and unread.

We find a similar pattern in 'At the Chateau of Corinne' (1887), where Woolson argues that another female literary icon, Madame de Staël, would not flourish in the present climate. This story makes explicit reference to de Staël, and the 'Corinne' of the title refers to the author herself and her most famous heroine. We remember that Eliot was herself an admirer of Madame de Staël and that she evokes her heroine Corinne in several of her novels, most explicitly in *The Mill on the Floss*. Given the status of de Staël and her novel *Corinne*, John Ford's misogynistic appraisal of her writing career in Woolson's story is clearly designed to provoke the reader's indignation. In Ford's brutal summation, he reduces de Staël to an egotistical woman who simply passed off men's ideas as her own, and condemns her desire for publication as a perverse rejection of 'her birthright of womanly' – that is, domestic – 'seclusion':

She expected all minds to defer to her superiority, while at the very moment she was engaged in extracting from them any poor little knowledge or ideas they might possess which could serve her

own purposes. All her books were talked into existence [...] A woman of genius! And what is the very term but a stigma? [...] I pity [literary women]. (787)

Here, the woman of genius is a contradiction in terms. Though Ford does not dispute the brilliance of her works, he circumvents an admission of female genius by dubbing her an imitative writer, attributing her ideas to the male intellectuals with whom she conversed (a criticism which continued to be levelled against George Eliot by misogynistic commentators). Literary ambition in a woman is an unfeminine trait, symptomatic of a delusional narcissist, below Ford's contempt and worthy only of 'pity.'

This summation prepares the reader for Ford's response to Katharine Winthrop's poetry. The negative associations with feminine literature saturate his criticism. Ford describes her poetry as a clumsy, chaotic effort driven by sentiment. 'Its rhythm' is 'crude and unmelodious,' 'its coloring 'exaggerated' and 'cloy[ing],' and its 'attempt at logic' 'utterly weak' (789). The only merit Ford can identify is 'a certain daring,' evidence of masculine innovation and breadth of perspective; but even this is presented as a source of disgust and dismay for Ford because of the sexual transgression it entails. He explains:

We do not expect great poems from women, any more than we expect great pictures; we do not expect strong logic any more than we expect brawny muscle. A woman's poetry is subjective. But what cannot be forgiven [is the] certain sort of daring [in this volume] [...] a woman should not dare in that way. Thinking to soar, she invariably descends. Her mental realm is not the same as that of man [...] and to see her leave [her own realm], and come in all her white purity, which must inevitably be soiled, to the garish arena where men are contending, where the dust is rising, and the air is tainted and heavy – this is indeed a painful sight [...] poor mistaken sibyl that she is [...] if the words she sang could be carried out to their logical end, if they were to be clothed in the hard realities of life and set up before her, they would strike first the poor creature who was chanting them, and crush her to the dust. (789)

In *Corinne*, the heroine is presented as a sibyl when her genius is at its height, but here, Ford reduces the mythological figure to a reductive stereotype of femininity that has no place in the literary sphere. Dominance in the literary arena demands the capabilities of the male soldier, the new masculine ideal that had been brought about by the Civil War:⁵¹ 'brawn' and brute force, quick, logical thinking and the bold 'daring' take on the 'hard realities of life.' The female writer naively intrudes upon this battle ground in her virginal whiteness, the iconic image of female purity, which will be 'soiled' through contact with the rough and

⁵¹ In her biography of Henry James, Lyndall Gordon writes that '[t]he Civil War brought about a marked narrowing of the idea of manhood, with an emphasis less on character than on strenuous public deed. The pressure to be masculine in a tougher sense gave the word new meaning.' See Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, p. 75.

tumble of the male art world. Unprepared for what she will find, she expects to gain recognition through singing, a common 'feminine' and instinctual domestic pastime, in contrast with the fierce intellectual struggle from which 'great' literary art emerges. Were she to venture further in, her frail constitution would be unable to endure the strain of true artistry; reality would 'strike' her and she would be physically 'crush[ed].' The 'poor mistaken sibyl' is of a different, gentler realm, naturally incapable of the virile force necessary for literary creation. In attempting to compete in this masculine realm, she is transgressing the boundaries of her sex, 'soil[ing]' her whiteness and potentially destroying herself.

The central concept of this story, that the narrow-minded prejudice of misogynistic critics is directly responsible for the destruction of women writers, is encapsulated in the bleak closing image of John Ford surveying his collection of de Staël's writing in the knowledge that Katharine's writing career is over. Whereas in de Staël's time, she prompted the great male thinkers in her salon to converse with her, and through this process produced her literary works, Katharine Winthrop's conversation with John Ford results in her relinquishing her artistic vocation. In modern times, the works of a female mind once considered so dangerous that its possessor was exiled from Paris become the possession of a man who cannot possibly appreciate their value (796). If the fate of women writers is in the hands of men like John Ford, then the prospect for modern American Corinnes looks bleak.

Acknowledging Woolson's reluctance to present us with a socially integrated, successful female writer in her short stories, several critics have explained this as an anticipation of the tactics used by 'New Woman' writers. Joan Myers Weimer acknowledges that Woolson's female artists are relegated to the periphery, but sees them as victims, 'compromised by the patriarchy of [their] time' and 'exiled from their own art.'⁵² In the same vein, Cheryl Torsney sees Woolson's artist heroines as being barred from 'entry into the world's highest artistic circles. Such was inevitable,' she continues, 'because social and political power rested in the hands of men.'⁵³ We might also see her fiction as being closely related to American women's rights literature from the mid-century onwards. Frequently using the analogy of the slave, this literature sought to provoke social change by exposing how women were oppressed by men and male-serving political and legal systems.⁵⁴

⁵² Weimer, 'Women Artists as Exiles', p. 4; Weimer, 'Introduction', in *Women Artists, Women Exiles: "Miss Grief" and Other Stories*, ed. Joan Myers Weimer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. xxxix.

⁵³ Torsney, p. 147.

⁵⁴ Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*. 2nd edn (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1992), pp. 21, 27.

I am inclined to agree with Anne E. Boyd, who suggests that female writers like Woolson ‘internalize[d] cultural strictures against literary ambitions’ even as they ‘were finding ways to overcome or circumvent such taboos,’ and that their fiction articulates ‘[t]heir discomfort with combining the identities of woman and artist.’⁵⁵ The reasons why I am inclined to agree with Boyd rest on the violent and humiliating way in which these artists are crushed, which is linked to an argument made by Nancy Bentley, that romantic success for these characters is often shown to be dependent on their ‘artistic abjection.’ This theory corresponds with the opposition between female authorship and romance Woolson evokes in her letter quoted at the start of the chapter. In Woolson’s stories, ‘a woman’s desirability is heightened in almost direct proportion to her failure or shame as an artist,’ ‘often figur[ing] marriage as either the public seal of a woman’s artistic failure or the private burial of a woman’s works of genius.’⁵⁶

In ‘Chateau,’ Ford declares his love for Katharine Winthrop after having scorned all literary women and humiliated her through his criticism of her poetry: he will not ‘forgive’ Katherine’s book, but will ‘forget it instead. You will write no more’ he dictates, and with her compliance, their nuptials ensue (795). Katharine then disappears from the narrative: ‘the climax of her story is absolute silence, as if she were not there,’ writes Lyndall Gordon, and the story ends with Ford ‘show[ing] off the volumes of *Corinne* in his bookcase [...] as a memento of conquest.’⁵⁷ In this instance, Katharine reverts to an antebellum ideal of femininity through her absence.

This process of artistic humiliation and romantic success is also presented in the fate of the painter Ettie Macks in ‘The Street of the Hyacinth’ (1882). The heroine of the story is introduced as a socially-empowered character whose identity as an artist and a woman remains uninfluenced by patriarchal mainstream ideas. She is ‘not observant of fashion’s changes’ and her unconventional hairstyle makes her ‘somewhat peculiar.’ On the boat from America, her fellow passengers note that ‘if she was a little more womanly [...] she would almost be pretty,’ and she plainly states that she refuses ‘to *reflect any one*’ (145, 143). As we see with Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver, who as a child deliberately cuts off her hair and constantly dirties her pinafore, Ettie’s intellectual identity and her refusal to succumb to her society’s expectations of her is marked on her person. She is also confident as an artist, unafraid to discuss her early achievements or express her self-belief. When asked her opinion of classical

⁵⁵ Boyd, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Nancy Bentley, ‘Literary Forms and Mass Culture, 1870-1920’, in *Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 3: Prose Writing*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 157.

⁵⁷ Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, p. 175.

paintings shown to her by Raymond Noel, an acknowledged patriarchal expert in the art world, she describes them as ‘ugly,’ ‘insipid,’ lacking any ‘reality or meaning’ (158). (Interestingly, Woolson herself was critical of canonical art and the canon-makers. In Florence, she described a fresco by Filippino Lippi (1486) as ‘grotesque, capricious; & exaggerated’ and was particularly uncomplimentary about the British art-critic John Ruskin, who she said could only see the small details of art – ‘The general effect of the whole, from a distance – this escapes him entirely.’)⁵⁸ To Noel’s surprise, Ettie regards him more as an equal than a mentor. Early in the story, she tells him ‘you must give up thinking of me as the usual young lady; you must not think of me in that way any more than I shall think of you as the usual young gentleman’ (144).

According to Noel, Ettie’s problem is her execution. Her ideas might be ‘original,’ but because she fails to express them in a way deemed acceptable by male artistic authorities, Noel deems her paintings ‘essentially bad’ (166, 172). That is, her ideas are rendered invalid by her failure to conform to gender-biased standards. She is, as Noel terms it, ‘intelligence without cultivation,’ and it is in his efforts to ‘cultivate’ her, to educate her in the way he and the artistic establishment see fit – to ‘put her back upon the alphabet’ – that her self-conception as an artist is destroyed (155, 165).

The imposition of patriarchal ideas onto the female artist is represented by the literature Noel sends her ‘with an accompanying note, a charming little note – which gave no address for reply’ (169). There is to be no dialogue between the female artist and the established conventions which both the volumes and the sender profess, only an acceptance of them on the part of the painter. We never see Ettie struggling with these ideas: the subsequent meeting between her and Noel shows her to have succumbed to these established standards, to have substituted her artistic vocation for a more conventional form of femininity which excludes her art. Replacing her ‘over-confidence’ and ‘direct, wide glance’ is the ‘grace in her bearing,’ with ‘everything, including the arrangement of her hair,’ ‘in the prevalent style.’ She announces that she is no longer painting; Noel’s books have taught her that her art has no value, and therefore her resignation from the art world is no loss: ‘You know it is not a pity,’ she tells him (170-1). Ettie subsequently receives three marriage proposals.

Two issues are especially troubling with this group of stories. The first is that though the male critics in Woolson’s stories are unquestionably prejudiced, rarely does Woolson

⁵⁸ Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, p. 162.

reinforce the victim-oppressor dichotomy in her writing by asserting the value of her female artists' work. Though the narrator acknowledges that Miss Grief is the superior writer, there is no way of judging whether Miss Grief is right in thinking that her manuscript is faultless, or whether the 'unrestrained' nature of her writing is symptomatic of something lacking or something unique that the narrator fails to grasp ('Miss Grief,' 33). In the same way, the reader is provided with no objective viewpoint from which to measure the worth of Katharine Winthrop's poetry in 'Chateau,' and beyond the reported admiration of the artistic authorities in Ettie's native Tuscolee ('Hyacinth,' 157-8), there is little way of discerning whether or not she is a talented painter.

The second issue is the inexplicable degree to which the women's sense of themselves as artists is so overwhelmingly dependent on male critics' appraisals of their work. Several commentators have suggested that the dependence of her female artists, particularly that of Miss Grief, is rooted in Woolson's relationship with Henry James. Until relatively recently, Leon Edel's biography of James provided the dominant reading of the relationship between the writers, and the bias of his interpretation still lingers in recent scholarship about Woolson which identifies James in her female artist stories. In this account, he is the focus of Woolson's life and writing career. Edel presents Woolson as a desperate old maid (Woolson was only three years older than James)⁵⁹ who pursued James all over Europe, a popular writer who 'aspired to some of the greatness of her friend,'⁶⁰ and who flattered his ego.⁶¹ However, as Lyndall Gordon demonstrates in her biography of James, the power dynamic between the pair was quite the reverse: James was so jealous of Woolson that she was often obliged to play down her successes so as not to discourage him.⁶² James's barbed criticism of Woolson, in which he constructed himself as the literary master evaluating the work of a gifted student, has been taken at face value by many critics. This accounts in part for readings which see James being portrayed in the figures of Raymond Noel and the narrator of "Miss Grief."⁶³

⁵⁹ Cheryl B. Torsney, 'The Tradition of Gender: Constance Fenimore Woolson and Henry James', in *Patrons and Protegees: Gender, Writing, and Friendship in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 164.

⁶⁰ Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James: The Middle Years, 1884-1894*. 5 vols. Vol. III (London: Hart-Davis, 1963), p. 141.

⁶¹ Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, pp. 25-27, 29, 141, 155, 255, 302, 322; *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Edel, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁶² See Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, pp. 169, 189, 215, 225.

⁶³ Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James*, pp. 169-70.

Anne E. Boyd also points out that Woolson wrote 'Miss Grief' before she had even met James.⁶⁴

Unlike her artist heroines, Woolson did not fold in the face of criticism from male literary authorities. In fact, there is evidence that she was quite ready to refute their assessments. Though hurt by William Dean Howell's harsh review of *East Angels*, for example, she was confident to dismiss his criticisms on the basis that he didn't consider Balzac's *Père Goriot* a masterpiece, privileging her literary judgement over that of her renowned colleague: 'I have not cared for his opinions (literary) since he came out so strongly against what I consider a masterpiece,' she wrote.⁶⁵

At the same time, Woolson's correspondence suggests that she was insecure about presenting herself to her male peers, including James, as a literary artist. Publically, Woolson generally opted to play down her achievements on the basis of her gender, presenting herself as a spectator, an 'admiring aunt' and 'desolate spinster' on the sidelines of the literary world, whose 'utmost best' work could not 'touch the hem' of Henry James's 'first or poorest.'⁶⁶ To what extent she was being kind to James, who struggled to reach the popular market, is not entirely clear. Woolson denied the possibility of female genius to two of her male correspondents. She wrote to James that his work was superior even to George Eliot's, explaining that '[a] woman, after all, can never be a complete artist,' and to E. C. Stedman that she had no 'quarrel' with his 'entire disbelief in the possibility of true fiery genius in woman.'⁶⁷ Yet in her private annotations, she was critical of the latter's stance on female genius: 'Mr. Stedman does not really believe in woman's genius. His disbelief peeps through every line of the criticism below, whose essence is – "She did wonderfully well for a woman."⁶⁸ This is especially ironic given that E. C. Stedman himself dubbed Woolson a genius. In one letter to Woolson, he writes: 'The best short stories since Hawthorne, the American themes and atmosphere, are yours and Bret Harte's [...] You are what God made

⁶⁴ Anne E. Boyd, 'Anticipating James, Anticipating Grief: Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Miss Grief"', in *Constance Fenimore Woolson's Nineteenth-Century: Essays*, ed. Victoria Brehm (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), p. 192.

⁶⁵ Letter to John Hay, July 30th 1886, in Alice Hall Petry, 'Always, Your Attached Friend': The Unpublished Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson to John and Clara Hay', *Books At Brown*, 29-30 (1982-3), 11-107, pp. 86-7.

⁶⁶ Letters to Henry James, Feb. 12 1882 and Aug. 30 1882, in *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Edel, Vol. III, pp. 528, 544; letter to Miss Arabella Carter, afterwards Mrs. Washburn, [n.d.], in Benedict, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Feminist criticism has had some difficulty with this, choosing either to ignore it or excuse it. Sharon Dean, for example, claims that Woolson was invoking genius as 'a male-based construct' from which women were necessarily excluded. Letter to Henry James, Feb. 12 1882, in *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Edel, p. 532; letter to E. C. Stedman, July 23 1876, quoted in Rayburn S. Moore, *Constance Fenimore Woolson* (New York: Twayne, 1963), p. 157n35; Sharon L. Dean, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), p. 174.

⁶⁸ Constance Fenimore Woolson, 'Notes on Books' in Benedict, p. 93.

you – a woman of taste, industry, insight, *plus* genius; and *your* so-called realistic method is charged no less with passion and imagination.’⁶⁹ If Woolson was not dependent on male artistic approbation, she was evidently anxious that male critics would devalue her literary efforts on the basis of her gender, and sought to evade that criticism by playing down her talent. The projection of her anxiety onto James and Stedman echoes the process we see in her fiction, where Woolson imagines rejection, exclusion and humiliation far beyond her own experience.

On the subject of projection, is there not the implication that Woolson was pre-empting criticism from her readers also? The reader is not only positioned as a horrified onlooker in Woolson’s stories, but we are inevitably making judgements about Woolson’s writing as we read. Our relationship with Woolson, then, begins to mirror in the victim-oppressor dynamic between her female artists and male critics. The alternatives are set out for us in black and white: are we for or against the prejudiced verdicts these men pass upon these women? Do we support the ideology that determines the male critics’ value judgements of female authorship? There is a sense in which Woolson is pre-empting and evading the reader’s criticism by showing the female artist, herself, being crushed, a process echoed in her correspondence with E. C. Stedman and Henry James on the subject of genius. The victim-oppressor dynamic is not simply a means of provoking her readers, but becomes a defensive outlet through which Woolson voices her anxiety about her status as a female author.

Conclusion

The revelations of London gossips about George Eliot’s private life brought Woolson’s artistic anxieties to the surface in her writing, hence the transition from veiled dealings with female authorship through the figure of the reading woman, to the explicit representations of crushed female artists in her short stories from 1880. We notice that several of her heroines, both prior to and after her departure for Europe, have autobiographical features, supporting the idea that like Eliot, she was continually seeking to construct a viable artistic identity for herself through her fiction: like her author, Ettie Macks, an American expatriate in Europe, is initially disparaging about the classical art world; Woolson used the pseudonym Anne March for a children’s story she wrote in 1873, *The Old Stone House*, and used the name Anne again for the heroine of her 1880 best-selling novel *Anne*; in *East Angels*, Margaret Harold

⁶⁹ See letter from E. C. Stedman to Woolson, [n.d.], in Benedict, p. 555.

recognises the literary value of Eliot's *Adam Bede* compared to other women who prefer popular fiction like Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World*, in the same way that Woolson laughed at an aunt who thought *Middlemarch* 'stupid' in her correspondence.⁷⁰

A female character who corresponds to Woolson's image of herself as an admiring spinster-aunt on the periphery of the literary art world⁷¹ is a minor character in 'At the Chateau of Corinne' called Sylvia Pitcher, Katharine's sickly aunt whose reading and art is stereotypically feminine, valueless, and damaging to her romantic life. For Sylvia, literature functions as a vicarious avenue into the romance that is missing from her own life. When not building 'cloud castle[s]' around Katherine and John Ford, she enjoys the idealism of Charlotte Yonge and the romance of Byron, and is a staunch admirer of Madame de Staël, the 'noble creature' she would rather have been 'than any one else on history's page' (782, 790, 784). Like the Victorian stereotype of the romance reader, Sylvia withdraws from reality in order to live vicariously through the characters and historical figures in her books. Sylvia also makes wax flowers (790), a domestic form of decorative reproduction which does claim any intellectual or social significance, and stands in opposition to the depth, complexity and vastness of so-called masculine art forms.

Though Sylvia is not an intelligent reader or a serious artist, neither does she correspond to the antebellum ideal of womanhood. She is presented outside of the traditional marital frame as a lonely older woman who, now incapable of finding romantic fulfilment in her own life, seeks it through others, be it through people she knows or through fictional characters. Sacrificing her femininity to an inferior kind of art, Sylvia warns of the futility of a woman choosing art over social integration. In this way, she serves a similar function to John Ford and his collection of de Staël's works, demonstrating the impossibility of female artistic genius blossoming in the modern age: the modern female artist who wishes to emulate the artistic heights of Madame de Staël manages to occupy only the lower feminine echelons of the art world. Sylvia embodies the anxiety that female artistry is a form of self-condemnation, a struggle against the inevitable: failure as a woman, and failure as an artist.

This is a specifically female condition, or female sickness from which Sylvia suffers. She is presented falling seriously ill during the narrative, and is so emaciated that her bracelets slip down to her shoulders when she reaches for a book (790, 782). This reflects

⁷⁰ Letter to Paul Hamilton Hayne, Jan. 16 1876, in Hubbell, p. 728.

⁷¹ Letters to Henry James, Feb. 12 1882 and Aug. 30 1882, in *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Edel, Vol III, pp. 528, 544; letter to Miss Arabella Carter, afterwards Mrs. Washburn, [n.d.], in Benedict, p. 18.

Woolson's idea that literary women were destined not only for loneliness, but for illness and misery – or, to use Cheryl Torsney's term, the 'grief of artistry.'⁷²

Woolson's correspondence makes repeated links between the literary vocation and female illness and misery. Hearing of Elizabeth Stoddard's illness, Woolson lamented the tendency of 'literary women' to 'break down.'⁷³ Her literature, she wrote, 'takes such entire possession of me that when, at last, a book is done, I am pretty nearly done myself;' she identified strongly with the idea that Eliot's writing 'ploughed into her,' attributing 'the tone of her letters and journals' to 'the bodily weariness of such constant literary toil' and 'the melancholy which [belongs] to all creative work in literature.'⁷⁴ Woolson was frequently subject to ill health and depression. She told one correspondent that she 'lost a whole year and more, owing to the depressed state of mind' after finishing her first novel *Anne*. She also became increasingly deaf during her forties, which added to her isolation, and eventually, the pain and prolonged infections brought about by attempts to use artificial eardrums meant she was not well enough to see anyone.⁷⁵

For Woolson, this female misery is closely involved in romantic failure. In her remarks, we are reminded of Woolson's comments to Emily Vernon Clarke which strongly conveyed her sense of the opposition between authorship and romance: 'The happiest women,' Woolson reported, were 'devoted wives and mothers, and the successful flirts, whether married or single,' and 'such women never wr[o]te.'⁷⁶ Woolson's correspondence bears out the idea that femininity, particularly romantic fulfilment, is closed off to women who pursue the literary vocation. Having spent an evening with fellow female writers Elizabeth Stoddard and Mary Mapes Dodge at the home of E. C. Stedman in 1874, Woolson commented '[h]ow much prettier and lovelier a thousand times over was Mrs. Stedman in every motion, look and tone than the best we other three could do! What *is* the reason that if we take up a pen we seem to lose so much in other ways?'⁷⁷ And to Linda Guildford she lamented that 'Oxford and rooms and writing a novel are poor things compared to a baby.'⁷⁸ Those women who took up the pen remained unloved. They were the 'spinster[s]' among

⁷² Torsney, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Grief of Artistry*.

⁷³ Letter to E. C. Stedman, July 23 [1876], quoted in Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, p. 174.

⁷⁴ Letters to Mrs Katherine Livingston Mather, J.L. and J. B. Gilder, and Miss Emily Vernon Clark, [n.d.], in Benedict, pp. 52, 31, 28.

⁷⁵ Letters to E. C. Stedman Sept. 16 1877 and Dr. William Wilberforce Baldwin Feb. 5 1892, quoted in Weimer, 'Introduction', pp. xvii-xviii.

⁷⁶ Letter to E. C. Stedman, July 23 1876, quoted in Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*, p. 174.

⁷⁷ Letter to E. C. Stedman, 28 Sept. 1874, quoted in Weimer, 'Introduction', p. xix.

⁷⁸ Letter to Linda Guilford, [n.d.], quoted in Weimer, 'Introduction', p. xix.

whom Woolson saw herself numbered, and were destined to be 'dry, bitter, and sour,'⁷⁹ looked down upon by the literary world for which they had forfeited their place in society and their hopes of marriage to gain entry. It was only exceptions like Eliot, 'indulged and 'petted'" women for whom these laws were apparently suspended, who could find romantic fulfilment as an author.⁸⁰

Woolson's engagement with the issue of female authorship is polemical and fraught. She presents Eliot's argument for female authorship within a gendered victim-oppressor dynamic, launching a direct attack on what she deemed a misogynistic literary world for its narrow system of values in a way that her predecessor was either too reticent or too subtle to attempt. Consistently provoking the reader's indignation at the prejudice of the establishment and the ramifications of this prejudice for women, the feminist agenda of Woolson's fiction is patent. Ironically, however, though Woolson prompts her readers to take an openly critical stance on critics' prejudice against women, her fictional female reader-authors and artists demonstrate that her own attitudes towards this prejudice are less than straightforward.

In its laudatory article of 1882, *Century Magazine* made the claim that 'a fragment of [...] the mantle of George Eliot is resting on [Woolson's] capable shoulders.'⁸¹ In light of the argument presented in this chapter, it is clear that this 'mantle' was resting on Woolson's shoulders in more senses than the article suggests. Eliot and her works embody a pressing dilemma which Woolson was trying to work out through her fiction, and ultimately her representations of female readers and artists become a documentation of her anxieties rather than an account of her artistic aspirations and feminist views. Woolson's fiction reveals that she was preoccupied with the idea that the modern woman who chose to write would resign herself to the 'grief of artistry,' finding herself suspended in the no-man's land wherein she was acknowledged by society neither as a woman nor as a literary artist.

The next chapter looks at another American writer, Edith Wharton, who, like Woolson, aspired to Eliot's greatness, but who took a much more aggressive approach to delineating her artistic identity against that of her British literary foremother. This chapter focuses on a pivotal seven year period early in Wharton's career: at this time, she was carving out her space for herself in the American literary scene and her preoccupation with George Eliot was at its height.

⁷⁹ Constance Fenimore Woolson, 'Thoughts, Maxims, Criticisms and Observations', in Benedict, p. 124.

⁸⁰ Letter to Miss Emily Vernon Clarke, [n.d.], in *The Complete Letters of Constance Fenimore Woolson*, ed. Dean, p. 550.

⁸¹ 'Miss Woolson's "Anne"', p. 636.

Chapter Four: Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and the Sentimental Lady Novelist

The ambivalent feelings about Eliot conjured up by Wharton's first reading of her novels as a young girl would characterise her attitude to the writer for the rest of her life. Writing to her governess Anna Bahlmann at the age of fourteen in 1876, the year *Daniel Deronda* was published in America, Edith Jones's estimation of Eliot's novel veers between harsh criticism and defence of the work. '[T]hough I am not disposed to judge it [as] harshly as at first,' she writes, 'I cannot think it compares to my beloved *Romola*. The story is nothing, & I do not care for the style, but the thoughts with which it overflows are wonderfully clever.' She describes its hero as 'a parcel of theories, loosely tied up, a puppet so badly stuffed that the sawdust shews,' but adds that 'the contents of the parcel & the doll – the theories, or sawdust – are good.' She dismisses Mirah as a 'piece [...] of faultlessness, like the good girls of such extravagant saintliness in Sunday school books,' but notes that Gwendolen is 'interesting.'⁸² In a letter written two years later, she describes her feelings about *Middlemarch* using the same impassioned language. She fails to feel the 'power' of the passion between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw and reports that she is 'provoke[d]' by Dorothea's 'want of artistic feeling.' Nonetheless, she admits that this lack is 'a wonderful touch of character drawing,' and adds that she has always had a 'sweet faiblesse' for Rosamond Vincy, and wants to 'throttle' the 'wonderfully life-like' Mrs Cadwallader, Cecilia and Sir James Chettam.⁸³

The conflicting emotions that reading Eliot inspired in the young Edith Jones, the compulsion to criticise but also defend a writer she deeply admired, characterise Wharton's response to Eliot and her fiction as she established herself as an author at the turn of the twentieth century. Her preoccupation with Eliot was at its peak during a formative seven year period at the start of her writing career, from 1900 to 1907, and during this time, she returned repeatedly to Eliot, using her as a touchstone from which to construct a viable female artistic identity for herself. Eliot was a literary role model Wharton desired to emulate, but thanks largely to Eliot's reception by patriarchal literary critics, she also embodied contemporary ideas about the limitations of feminine authorship. As a result, Wharton's ideas about how Eliot's gender impacted on her fiction and what Eliot represented for women and literary art are not only inconsistent but often contradictory. Wharton struggled with the need to defend

⁸² Letter to Anna Bahlmann, Sept. 23 1876, in Irene Goldman-Price, ed., *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 37-8.

⁸³ Letter to Anna Bahlmann, Sept. 2 [1878], in Goldman-Price, p. 39.

and equal a woman who was the only female writer that Wharton ever accepted (albeit privately) as a literary role model or even a peer, and at the same time, to distance herself from and exceed this figure who was rapidly falling out of fashion in contemporary literary criticism. In many respects, Eliot was a debilitating model of female authorship for Wharton, and this chapter will trace how she struggled with her during this crucial phase in her writing career.

The pivotal seven year period alluded to above spans Wharton's transition, as she describes it, from a 'drifting amateur' to a 'professional' author.⁸⁴ Wharton had begun her career writing short stories in the 1890s, and it was the positive reception of her first collection *The Greater Inclination* (1899) which marked the start of a concentrated period of artistic self-definition from 1900 to 1907. Wharton's literary reception must surely have raised two points for the author: the first was that she now had a reputation to uphold; the second was that she would have to overcome the artistic shortcomings of her gender to uphold it. 'I do not think I exaggerate,' Wharton told one correspondent,

in saying that [*Inclination*] has met with an unusually favourable reception for a first volume by a writer virtually unknown. The press-notices have been, almost uniformly, not only approving but very flattering; & such papers as the Springfield Republican, the N. Y. Times, Literature, &c, have given a column of commendation, while I hear the Bookman is to publish an article in the coming number. In addition to this, the book was taken by an English publisher within a fortnight of its appearance here.⁸⁵

Responses to *Inclination* saw Wharton compared with literary giants like Henry James, and being presented as a writer at the forefront of the literary field. Writing for the *Bookman*, Harry Thurston Peck expressed his relief to find fiction 'that reveal[ed] the stamp of art':

We could count upon the fingers of one hand the books of the past year that any one would ever think of reading a second time or of referring to hereafter, and one of these rare exceptions to the general rule of mediocrity and dulness [sic] we have found in a volume of eight short stories by Mrs. Edith Wharton.

Crucially, many critics highlighted Wharton's gender as a disadvantage which made her achievement all the more remarkable. An anonymous review for the *Academy* distinguished Wharton for 'writ[ing] with the finished ease of the skilled craftsman, and with the feeling and distinction of an artist,' adding that '[s]uch a phenomenon is rare, especially among

⁸⁴ In her memoir, Wharton describes how writing *The House of Mirth* transformed her into a 'professional' author. See Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p. 137.

⁸⁵ Letter to William Crary Brownell, Apr. 25 1899, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 37.

women writers.’⁸⁶ Even at this early stage, several reviewers were attributing her early success to her role as a disciple of Henry James.⁸⁷

This climate prompted an intensive phase in Wharton’s writing career in which she attempted to carve out a space for herself in the American literary scene, beginning in 1900 when she published *The Touchstone*, peaking in 1905 with the commercial and critical triumph of *The House of Mirth*, and ending in 1907 with the publication of *The Fruit of the Tree*. Using Eliot and her fiction as a point of reference, Wharton experimented with a range of artistic identities in this period in an effort to reconcile her gender, and also her class (which was another problematic factor for Wharton) with her authorship. As her approaches to artistic self-definition changed, so too did her attitude towards Eliot, and what she represented for Wharton. As we will see over the course of this chapter, the result was that her approach to Eliot in her writing and her claims about her authorship are replete with contradictions and inconsistencies. She claims to be a ‘masculine’ author by aligning herself with Eliot, whom she identifies as a masculine writer, and then achieves the same end by distancing herself from Eliot, whom she presents as a fundamentally feminine author in the sense used in misogynist literary criticism; she claims the ability to produce superior forms of literature as an innate gift which cannot, as Eliot claims, be achieved through self-culture, but later describes herself as ‘self-made;’ she follows Eliot in championing feminine authorship as a morally valuable artistic enterprise but at the same time criticises it as a substandard artistic role to which women are restricted; she claims what critics termed masculine literary engagement as the province of the female artist as per Eliot’s androgynous ideal, then asserts that women cannot escape their biology and are ultimately limited to being imitative artists.

Scholars acknowledging the impact of Eliot on Wharton and her authorship have tended to focus on the parallels between their works of fiction, particularly between *The House of Mirth* and *Daniel Deronda*.⁸⁸ Critics have often cited works by Wharton as being

⁸⁶ *Academy*, 57, 8 July 1899, 40, in James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, eds., *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 21.

⁸⁷ See esp. ‘Recent American Fiction’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 86 (Sept. 1900), 418-9, repr. in James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, ed. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 37.

⁸⁸ Constance Rooke and Mary Nyquist deal with the novels as pieces of social criticism, with Rooke claiming that both women are warped by the societies they live in, and Nyquist (who sees the relationship between *Deronda* and *Mirth* as being mediated by Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*) claiming they are satirised representatives of their culture. Stuart Hutchinson’s two essays are largely evaluative in nature, focussing on dispelling the idea that Wharton compares to Eliot as a writer (both articles claim that Wharton’s writing is ‘superficial’ and ‘limited’), however he does point out numerous useful points of comparison between *Daniel Deronda* and *The House of Mirth*, as well as similarities between other works by Eliot and Wharton. Constance Rooke, ‘Beauty in Distress: *Daniel Deronda* and *The House of Mirth*’, *Women & Literature*, 4 (1976), 28-39; Stuart Hutchinson, ‘From *Daniel Deronda* to *The House of Mirth*’, *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of*

‘derived’ from Eliot’s,⁸⁹ and compared the social commentaries, particularly the feminist ideas, that they express. They have highlighted plot points, characterisation, particular scenes and even entire phrases and images that have been lifted from Eliot’s fiction. Eliot has frequently been cited as a writer whom Wharton admired, with critics discussing Wharton’s praise of her novels, her style, and her intellect.⁹⁰ However, aside from some analysis of her review of Leslie Stephen’s biography of Eliot in 1902, where Wharton uses Eliot as a basis from which to make a commentary about the dilemma facing female authors,⁹¹ the full extent of this ambivalence, and the degree to which her ideas about Eliot and her fiction infiltrate into Wharton’s essays and fiction, has yet to be fully examined.

I will be dealing with key instances of Wharton’s writing in rough chronological order and showing how they form a commentary on Eliot and her fiction, looking first at two early essays in which Wharton is defining herself as an artist. The earliest of these, the review of Leslie Stephen’s biography (1902), deals explicitly with Eliot and the quality (and shortcomings) of her fiction. The second, ‘The Vice of Reading’ (1903), I will be reading as a reworking of Eliot’s famous essay ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (1856), and showing that in Wharton’s discussion of readers she is also presenting a discussion about female authorship and responding to Eliot’s arguments. The most revealing and complex response Wharton makes to Eliot can be seen in her use of Eliot’s female reader-author figure in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), a novel which has attracted little attention from scholars. In these works, Wharton experiments with the arguments Eliot makes in her fiction through her female readers in an effort to construct a viable artistic identity.

George Eliot and the Limitations of Female Authorship

Eliot occupied a unique and contradictory position for American women writers at the end of the nineteenth century. She became a focal point for debates about the capacity of women to write at this time, and her fiction was cited as evidence on both sides of the debate.

Literary Criticism, 47 (1997), 315-31; Stuart Hutchinson, ‘Beyond’ George Eliot?’; Mary Nyquist, ‘Determining Influences: Resistance and Mentorship in *The House of Mirth* and the Anglo-American Realist Tradition’, in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸⁹ Stuart Hutchinson, ‘Beyond’ George Eliot? Reconsidering Edith Wharton’, *Modern Language Review*, 95 (2000), 942-53, pp. 942-3.

⁹⁰ Deborah Lindsay Williams, *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 35-6; Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 75-6; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 106-7; R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 94, 108-9; Shari Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), pp. 108, 127-8.

⁹¹ See in particular Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, pp. 74-6. See also Wolff, pp. 106-7.

To many women writers, Eliot was an icon. Sarah Orne Jewett used ‘Alice Eliot’ as a pseudonym for her first manuscripts, and in 1894, Willa Cather named George Eliot and George Sand as the only two ‘real’ female authors.⁹² In 1886, essayist Abba Goold Woolson claimed that the position attained by Eliot in English literature was ‘the very highest yet reached by her sex. The long list of British authors presents the name of no other woman who holds in any department the first rank.’⁹³ She might easily have extended this to American women authors. After her death, Eliot maintained her position as the pinnacle of female authorship on both sides of the Atlantic, the accepted standard by which the female writer must set herself.

We need only look at the impact *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch* made on Wharton to see that she was amongst the authors who viewed Eliot as a literary role model. In a letter to Robert Grant in 1900, Wharton praised the heroine of his novel *Unleavened Bread* as being ‘as good in her way as Gwendolen Grandcourt. Every stroke tells, & you never forget the unconscious quality of her selfishness; you never fall into the error of making her deliberately false or cruel,’ the implication being that in Wharton’s opinion, Eliot’s heroine marked a highpoint in literary characterisation.⁹⁴ Five years later, she reworked Gwendolen’s narrative in *The House of Mirth*. The parallels between *Daniel Deronda* and *The House of Mirth* have been well-documented by Wharton scholars.⁹⁵ As in Eliot’s novel, the plot of *The House of Mirth* reaches its climax in the Mediterranean, where Lily is thrown off Bertha Dorset’s yacht (Grandcourt drowns during a yachting trip in *Daniel Deronda*), and like Gwendolen, Lily is repeatedly humiliated over the course of her narrative and seeks help from a male mentor who ultimately fails her. Critics have highlighted Lily’s financially precarious situation, her involvement in a *tableau vivant*, and particular images such as Lily as ‘a princess in exile’ and her visitation by the Furies, as being drawn from *Daniel Deronda*. They have treated *Daniel Deronda* and *The House of Mirth* as works of social criticism, noting the similarities in the downward trajectories of their respective heroines.

Wharton’s writing also bears the imprint of her reading of *Middlemarch*. Wharton frequently alludes to Eliot’s novel in her fiction by reworking characters and using plot points and language particular to the novel. Rosamond Vincy appears in the guise of Bessy

⁹² Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 32; Willa Cather, ‘The Passing Show’, *Lincoln Courier*, 7 (Nov. 1895) repr. in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews 1893-1902*, ed. William M. Curtin. 2 vols. Vol I (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 277.

⁹³ Abba Goold Woolson, *George Eliot and her Heroines*, p. 41.

⁹⁴ Letter to Robert Grant, Jul. 25 1900 in Lewis and Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 41.

⁹⁵ See footnote 250.

Westmore in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), a novel which reworks the Dorothea-Lydgate-Rosamond triangle (this will be of more interest to us later). The Dorothea-Casaubon marriage is alluded to in Wharton's short story 'The Angel at the Grave' (1901), in which Wharton imagines what might have befallen Dorothea had she continued with Casaubon's work after his death.⁹⁶ The image of 'the years stretch[ing] before [Paulina] like some vast blank page' recalls Casaubon's reference to Dorothea turning the 'backward pages' of their life together in his letter of proposal in *Middlemarch*, and similarly, just as Dorothea is 'buried alive' 'in that stone prison at Lowick,' so Wharton's heroine feels 'walled alive into a tomb hung with the effigies of dead ideas.'⁹⁷ When Wharton fell ill during the writing of *The Touchstone* (1900) and despaired of finishing, Walter Berry, whom Wharton later said 'understood [her] always' and 'helped [her] believe in [her]self,' sent her a passage from George Eliot's journal written in 1869: 'I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of *Middlemarch*,' Eliot wrote. 'It is worth while to record my great depression of spirits that I may remember one more resurrection from the pit of melancholy.'⁹⁸ For Wharton, *Middlemarch* was 'the greatest achievement of all,' and she compared the hero Will Ladislaw to 'a portrait by Titian'⁹⁹ – an enormous compliment from a woman who had spent many childhood years in Italy absorbing herself in European art, and who prided herself on being an art connoisseur.¹⁰⁰

At the same time however, Eliot had become increasingly unpopular in American literary circles after her death in 1880. This meant that whilst she maintained her position as one of the most renowned female authors in America, she was also seen as a flawed literary model for women writers, and was used by critics to reinforce the perceived limitations of female authorship. Eliot was compared to the 'literary giants' – Shakespeare, Goethe, Fielding, Balzac¹⁰¹ – and presented as a disciple of male intellectuals – of G. H. Lewes, Herbert Spencer, Comte, Tyndall and Haeckel¹⁰² – but was often viewed as ultimately falling

⁹⁶ See Teresa Gómez Reus, 'Revisiting 'The Angel at the Grave': Parallelisms between Edith Wharton and George Eliot', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 2 (1993), 9-17, esp. pp. 13-4.

⁹⁷ Edith Wharton, 'The Angel at the Grave', in *Crucial Instances* (Maryland: Wildside Press, 2005), pp. 30, 33; Eliot, *Middlemarch*, pp. 40, 206.

⁹⁸ Journal entries dated Sept. 11 and 24 1869, in Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, eds., *The Journals of George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 138; letter from Walter Berry to Edith Wharton, Nov. 28 [1899], quoted in Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance*, p. 108.

⁹⁹ Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 99.

¹⁰⁰ See Emily J. Orlando, 'Visual Arts', in *Edith Wharton in Context*, ed. Laura Rattray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 178.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Eggleston, pp. 49-50; Hazeltine, pp. 4-6.

¹⁰² See Cooke, pp. 2, 166.

short of literary greatness on the basis of what were termed the 'feminine' tendencies in her writing, as Henry James had argued years earlier in his review of *Felix Holt*:

She has the microscopic observation, not a myriad of whose keen notations are worth a single one of those great sympathetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth [...] [she has] exquisitely good taste on a small scale, the absence of taste on a large [...] the unbroken current of feeling and, we may add, of expression, which distinguishes the feminine mind. That she should be offered a higher place than she has earned, is easily explained by the charm which such gifts as hers in such abundance are sure to exercise [...] With a certain masculine comprehensiveness [...] she is eventually feminine – a delightfully feminine – writer.¹⁰³

Writing in 1866, James's presentation of masculine authorship incorporates the idea of scale we saw at work in the previous chapter, but also the increasingly prevalent idea of science ('microscopic observation') compared to the emotion, ephemerality and imprecision of feminine writing ('sympathetic guesses,' 'feeling,' 'expression,' 'charm'), concepts which were well established in American literary criticism by the turn of the century.

As Amy Kaplan has pointed out, the use of the work 'scientific' had a particular meaning for late nineteenth-century American authors:

In general, scientific knowledge became the major source of legitimation for most professions in the late nineteenth century; such knowledge distinguished the expertise of the specialist from the common sense of the lay person, the amateur knowledge of the dilettante, and the commercialism of the quack. Within several professions, this expertise was used to supplant and exclude the untrained and uneducated female practitioner.¹⁰⁴

The ideal of the masculinised scientist-author had been cultivated in response, in part, to the increasing presence of women in the literary sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As we saw in Chapter One, female involvement in the literary world was at its height in America at the end of the century.¹⁰⁵ By 1872, nearly three quarters of all published authors in America were female,¹⁰⁶ and in response to this, the female counterpart to the male scientist-author, the 'lady novelist,' became a critical commonplace. Typically, this writer's sentimental, lightweight 'reproductions' of her limited experience echoed her special function, and she was increasingly incorporated into criticism which sought to re-establish the cultural authority of the male artist:

¹⁰³ [Henry James], 'Review of *Felix Holt*', *Nation*, 3 (Aug. 16 1866), 127-8, repr. in Pierre de Chagnon la Rose, ed. *Notes and Reviews* (Massachusetts: Dunster House, 1921), pp. 207-8.

¹⁰⁴ Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁵ Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility', p. 201.

¹⁰⁶ Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*, p. 2.

The feminine intellect has a passion for detail [...] Those who have worked in the spirit of Miss Austen [...] have chosen, for the most part, small canvases and limited themselves to those types of character which they could reproduce through experience, and not create through some active exercise of imagination. As women are happiest when they reproduce, as they are least happy when they create, in literature, we obtain along this line of work some of the best things which women have done in our generation.¹⁰⁷

These negative 'feminine' qualities were often encapsulated in the epithet 'sentimental.' As Nina Baym and Cathy Davidson have shown, the equation of women's writing with sentimental literature is a gross oversimplification of the diverse styles, plots, themes and ideologies present in the writings of female authors;¹⁰⁸ however the use of 'sentimental' as shorthand for inferior, ephemeral literature written by women continued to be used at this time by literary critics (not to mention, as we shall see later, Wharton herself).

As conservative American critics moved to re-establish the male writer's cultural authority, Eliot's example understandably presented an obstacle, and it followed that the author became a focus for many commentators seeking to diminish female literary capabilities. This meant that whilst Wharton would undoubtedly have been flattered at the number of comparisons with Eliot she received,¹⁰⁹ as an ambitious woman who sought to compete with her male peers, she must also have been very much aware of the problems inherent with those comparisons, and the equally problematic lack of an alternative female literary model. Wharton was faced with the challenge of aligning herself with an author she deeply admired and defending her as an author, and at the same time distancing herself from her. This was something that Wharton was preoccupied with, especially in the period from 1900 to 1907 as she tried to carve out a space for herself in the American literary scene as a writer to be taken seriously by literary critics.

Turning to the first phase of this process, we can see Wharton's review of Leslie Stephen's biography of Eliot in 1902 as veiled discussion about her artistic identity. Through

¹⁰⁷ W. L. Courtney, *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1904), pp. xxxii-xxxiv.

¹⁰⁸ See Ann Jurecic, 'The Fall of the Knowledgeable Woman: The Diminished Female Healer in Edith Wharton's "The Fruit of the Tree"', *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, 29 (1996), 29-53, p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ Over the course of her writing career, Wharton was often compared to Eliot. Henry James declared that 'the good George Eliot' 'sound[ed] through' Wharton's writing. He later enthused to Charles Scribner that the 'finest parts of *The Reef*' were 'beyond' George Eliot. 'To find her equal in fiction one must turn to George Eliot' reported one critic in 1906. Another reviewer enthusiastically declared that Wharton had 'surpassed' Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth in the creation of Lily Bart. Charles Scribner, Wharton's publisher, himself called Wharton 'the George Eliot of her time.' See letters from Henry James to Edith Wharton, Dec. 4 [and 9] 1912 and Jan. 31 1913, in *Henry James: Letters*. Vol IV, ed. Edel, pp. 645, 650; Alice May Boutell, 'A Burst of Enthusiasm', *Critic*, 48 (Jan. 1906), 87-8, repr. in James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, eds. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 129; 'The Abode of the Fool's Heart', *Literary Digest*, 31 (Dec. 1905), 886, repr. in Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray, p. 121; letter from Charles Scribner to Edith Wharton, [n.d.], quoted in Benstock, p. 128.

her praise and criticism of Eliot's writing, she both aligns herself with and distances herself from the author, and in this way, she defines herself as a literary artist.

Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot* (1902) was the first volume of the English Men of Letters series, and also the only volume to feature a woman author. This biography, which deals with Eliot's poetry and each of her novels in turn, celebrates Eliot's writing. It is also, however, characteristic of the fashion of the time in its focus on the deemed shortcomings of Eliot's writing. As well as dismissing Eliot's writing as feminine, as Henry James did in his review of *Felix Holt* in 1866, critics often condemned Eliot for her preoccupation with 'scientific allusion,' and Stephen's criticism of Eliot falls mostly into this second category. 'George Eliot's environment was always so scientific and philosophical that it would have been difficult to be quite free from the taint,' Stephen explains.¹¹⁰

In her article, Wharton evaluates Eliot's writing and its literary worth in light of Stephen's assessment. In so doing, Wharton uses Eliot as a point of reference from which to define herself as an artist with regard to the essentialising debates about female authorship taking place at this time.

Wharton's review has been read as an attempt to salvage Eliot's reputation and celebrate her as a writer in the face of the wave of anti-Victorian literary criticism at the turn of the century.¹¹¹ The essay opens with an acknowledgement of 'the momentary neglect into which [Eliot] has fallen,' followed by the assurance that '[s]uch "interlunar" phases are the lot of all great writers' (she notes that Macaulay and Racine have also been victims). Wharton trusts, she writes, that 'the genius of George Eliot [...] may well trust its case to posterity.' She is openly critical of 'the belittling process by which each generation thinks to mark its advance over its predecessors,' noting that the 'principal charge against [Eliot] seemed to be that she was too "scientific," that she sterilised her imagination and deformed her style by the study of biology and metaphysics.'¹¹² Again, she compares Eliot with a number of canonical male authors influenced by scientific study: Tennyson, Goethe, Milton. 'Is it because they were men,' she questions, 'while George Eliot was a woman, that she is reproved for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread?'¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1902), pp. 57-8.

¹¹¹ See Showalter, 'The Greening of Sister George', p. 298n16.

¹¹² Edith Wharton, 'George Eliot', *Bookman*, 15 (May 1902), 247-51, repr. in Frederick Wegener, ed. *The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 71.

¹¹³ Wharton, 'George Eliot', pp. 71, 72.

This was a calculated move on Wharton's part, as by insisting on a female author's right to tread on 'scientific' ground, she was claiming this right for herself.¹¹⁴ This was a risky strategy in literary circles where female authors' claims to writing in what was deemed a masculine way easily led to 'rejection and exclusion.'¹¹⁵ Wharton therefore tempers this claim: after the positive opening remarks in which Wharton emphasises Eliot's status as a masculine, scientific writer, she becomes anxious to show Eliot compromised as a masculine writer. The majority of the essay catalogues the defects in Eliot's writing that align her with the figure of the sentimental lady novelist. The clearest instance of this comes in comments on *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which Wharton claims was designed to '[appeal] to the facile sentimentalism of the early Victorian public.'¹¹⁶ As we will see, the opposing concepts of masculine science and feminine sentiment in literature consistently shape Wharton's ideas about authorship. The sentimental lady novelist is also subtly alluded to in Wharton's claim that Eliot 'never ceased to revere the law[s of respectability] she had transgressed.' In making this claim, Wharton undermines the idea that Eliot's works were controversial in their presentation of women, and signals that Eliot's fiction was a product of its time.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Wharton's depiction of Eliot as a popular author pandering to public opinion aligns her with the lady novelist:

Perhaps the greatest defect of George Eliot's novels is their cumbersome construction. This fault is less chargeable to the author than to the taste of her day. The greatest writers have made concessions (if unconsciously, yet inevitably) to the requirements of their public; and George Eliot was no exception to the rule.¹¹⁸

Stereotypically, popular female authors who were compelled to write by feeling and narcissistic impulse were not concerned with the aesthetic or technical issues of form and coherence which interested the male author. Eliot's 'peculiarly unsuccessful' 'endeavour to reconcile [the psychological] study of moral crises with the popular demand for a plot' – to fuse 'the external' (plot) with 'the emotional' (psychology) – is another fault which consigns her to the lesser feminine category of authorship.¹¹⁹ Wharton also evokes the established idea that the 'carefully sheltered existence' of women writers impaired their ability to evoke

¹¹⁴ The sciences Eliot and Wharton were dealing with were not identical: Wharton's fiction bears the marks of her reading of theorists such as Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Lamarck, and also of French naturalists such as Zola, whereas Eliot dealt more with organicism and contemporary evolutionary theories of body and mind.

¹¹⁵ Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, p. 76.

¹¹⁶ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 74.

¹¹⁷ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 76.

¹¹⁸ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 75.

¹¹⁹ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 75.

reality in their fiction, reporting that Eliot's 'growing preoccupation with moral problems coincided with an almost complete withdrawal from ordinary contact with life.'¹²⁰

By implication, Wharton's essay insists that her writing is set apart from Eliot's flawed, feminine literature. Wharton's self-claimed masculine style, and the consequent superiority of her own writing, is subtly asserted in her closing observations: 'the novelist of manners,' she writes 'needs a clear eye and a normal range of vision to keep his pictures in perspective; and the loss of perspective' – which she explains as a 'narrowing' focus on 'moral problems,' resulting in a decreased 'breadth of vision' – 'is the central defect in George Eliot's later books.'¹²¹ The main problem with Eliot's fiction, according to Wharton, is that she could not extricate herself from her 'restricting' 'early existence in Coventry;' she could not overcome the laws placed on her as a woman within that 'narrow' culture, and as a result, she spent her career 'proclaiming' 'her allegiance to [laws] she appeared to have violated.'¹²² Her works are motivated by a desire to affirm her role as a 'respectable' woman, not an author.

Wharton makes it clear that she is the exception to the rule of female authorship in her correspondence: 'I conceive my subjects like a man,' she wrote to Robert Grant in 1907, 'or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in,' an approach which she assures him is 'congenital,' not feigned or "imitative."¹²³

In this comment, Wharton makes reference to her reading of evolutionary theory. As her biographers have noted, Wharton read deeply in the works of Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Haeckel and Lamarck. Wharton also adds Edvard Westermarck and George Romanes to the list in her memoir *A Backward Glance* and claims in a letter to Sara Norton that Darwin in particular was a 'formative influence' on her intellectual development.¹²⁴ (Several studies have been produced about the ideas of social and biological determinism that inform her fiction.¹²⁵) Wharton is alluding to these ideas in the claim that her style of writing is

¹²⁰ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 77.

¹²¹ Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 77.

¹²² Wharton, 'George Eliot', p. 77.

¹²³ Letter to Robert Grant, Nov. 19 [1907], in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. Lewis and Lewis, p. 124.

¹²⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 63; letter to Sara Norton, Mar. 16 1908, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. Lewis and Lewis, p. 136; Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 56; Benstock, p. 62.

¹²⁵ Contributions to this area have been made by James Tuttleton (1982), Donald Pizer (1992, 1995, 2008), Barbara Hochman (1995), Judith P. Saunders (2005, 2009), Paul J. Ohler (2006) and Laura Saltz (2011). James W. Tuttleton, 'Edith Wharton', in *American Realists and Naturalists*, ed. Donald Pizer and Earl N. Harbert (Detroit: Gale, 1982); Donald Pizer, 'American Naturalism in Its 'Perfect' State: The Age of Innocence and An American Tragedy', in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York: Garland, 1992); Donald Pizer, 'The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*', *Twentieth*

‘congenital,’ as quoted above: her writing style is an acquired characteristic, a reference to Lamarck’s idea that physiological changes acquired over the lifetime of an individual, including intelligence, or a masculine approach to authorship, could be passed on to offspring.¹²⁶ In Newland Archer’s reading of ‘the new ideas in his scientific books’ in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton recalls the ‘much-cited’ example of the Kentucky cave-fish which, as a result of living in perpetual darkness, ‘had ceased to develop eyes.’¹²⁷ If we read this phenomenon alongside Wharton’s review of Stephen’s biography and the idea of Wharton’s approach to authorship being ‘congenital,’ we see she is singling herself out as an exception to other women like Eliot who have been raised for generations in intellectual darkness and so lost the capacity to write superior, masculine literature. In complete contradiction to this, Wharton is also reported to have referred to herself as a ‘self-made man’ amongst friends, implicitly claiming that by pure hard graft she was able to overcome the shortcomings of her biology and her environment.¹²⁸ Presumably Eliot’s hard graft was inadequate to enable her to do either of these things. Whatever the basis or the reasoning, it is clear that Wharton was insisting on her identity as a masculine writer, and was using Eliot to make this assertion.

At the same time, Wharton was also anxious about the still prevalent view that a woman capable of writing so-called masculine fiction could be de-sexed. Again, she uses Eliot as a point of reference from which to articulate this view, most notably in *The Touchstone* (1900). This novella concerns the publication of love letters from a deceased famous author, Mrs. Aubyn, to a younger man who sells them to finance his marriage. Salley Vickers and Amy Kaplan have both suggested that the recently deceased Mrs. Aubyn is a veiled portrait of Eliot. They note the similarities between the literary reputations of Aubyn and Eliot and Wharton’s focus on the damaging effects of Eliot’s status as a literary celebrity

Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal, 41 (1995), 241-48; Donald Pizer, *American Naturalism and the Jews: Garland, Norris, Dreiser, Wharton, and Cather* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Barbara Hochman, 'The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Plotting Experience and Experiencing Plot', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*, ed. Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Judith P. Saunders, 'Evolutionary Biological Issues in Edith Wharton's *The Children*', *College Literature*, 32 (2005), 83-102; Judith P. Saunders, *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens: Evolutionary Biological Issues in Her Fiction* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2009); Paul J. Ohler, *Edith Wharton's "Evolutionary Conception": Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); Laura Saltz, 'The Vision-Building Faculty': Naturalistic Vision in *The House of Mirth*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57 (2011), 17-46.

¹²⁶ See Saltz, pp. 35-6.

¹²⁷ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*. ed. Candace Waid (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), pp. 52-3.

¹²⁸ See Lubbock, p. 21.

on her writing and her life in her review of Leslie Stephen's biography.¹²⁹ Moving away from the perspectives adopted in her review of Leslie Stephen's biography, Wharton's novella engages with the idea about Eliot adopted by some literary critics that her intellectual approach to authorship compromised her femininity:

To beauty Mrs Aubyn could lay no claim [...] Her dress never seemed a part of her; all her clothes had an impersonal air, as though they had belonged to someone else and been borrowed in an emergency that had somehow become chronic [...] Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair.¹³⁰

As a woman who praised Eliot for her intellect and scorned those who devalued her writing on the basis that it was 'too scientific,' Wharton's irony is patent. In *The Touchstone*, Eliot is perceived as 'George Sand *plus* Science and *minus* Sex.'¹³¹ Not only is Mrs. Aubyn unattractive, but her alleged lack of femininity is compounded by her unsuccessful love life, now made public by letters written to a man 'who evidently didn't care.'¹³² Whilst Wharton is critical of the idea that authorship would de-sex a female writer, it is significant that she does not go so far as to contradict this idea in her narrative. In this way, *The Touchstone* highlights that the tension between intellectual literature and femininity in literary criticism remained an enduring cause of concern for Wharton.

Re-Classing the Female Author

Wharton's anxieties about her vocation were not located in ideas about gender alone. Unlike any of the other authors examined in this thesis, Wharton also had to contend with the issue of her class. There were certain things a respectable woman from Wharton's social set did not do, and unfortunately for Wharton, authorship was counted among these. As I will be discussing shortly, Eliot's 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' is used by Wharton as a template for her response to this dilemma in 'The Vice of Reading,' an essay in which she attempts to rewrite the inverse relationship between high class and authorship.

The relationship between class and literary engagement in Wharton's social milieu is evoked in Wharton's memoir *A Backward Glance*, where Wharton details how her parents and their upper-class social set 'stood in nervous dread' of writers, deeming authorship a

¹²⁹ See Salley Vickers, 'Foreword', in Edith Wharton, *The Touchstone* (London: Hesperus Press, 2003), p. ix; Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, pp. 174-5n45.

¹³⁰ Edith Wharton, *The Touchstone*, p. 13.

¹³¹ William Ernest Henley, *Views and Reviews*, in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* ed. Gordon S. Haight, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) p. 162.

¹³² Wharton, *The Touchstone*, p. 41.

‘disturbing’ and potentially ‘contaminat[ing]’ activity which threatened to break the boundaries between the classes.¹³³ Writing was still likened to ‘a form of manual labour,’ and so was situated in direct conflict with the leisure-class identity which was founded on the idea of being so wealthy that paid work was unnecessary.¹³⁴ Furthermore, to write literature was deemed tantamount to pandering to vulgar public taste. Wharton’s mother disdainfully referred to popular authors, or ‘unfortunates’ as she dubbed them, who were “common’ yet so successful.’¹³⁵ Wharton’s broken engagement at the age of twenty was accounted for by the *Newport Daily News* as being due to ‘an alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride. Miss Jones is an ambitious authoress, and it is said that, in the eyes of Mr. Stevens, ambition is a grievous fault.’¹³⁶ The accuracy of this account and how rigidly its ideas were enforced is questionable,¹³⁷ but it highlights the difficulty Wharton must have experienced as a woman of her social status who wished to assert her identity as an intellectual in her social set. Many forms of reading were also deemed suspect, particularly when it came to young, impressionable upper-class female readers. As we have seen in previous chapters, certain forms of literature were seen as too ‘contaminat[ing]’ and ‘disturbing’ for women, especially unmarried girls who were seen to be vulnerable to being corrupted by their reading.¹³⁸ Wharton’s biographers have noted the negative reaction of her parents to her inclination for reading: Wharton’s mother Lucretia banned her young daughter from reading ‘ephemeral rubbish’ and ‘all the lesser novelists of the day.’¹³⁹

These difficulties are addressed by Wharton in ‘The Vice of Reading,’ an essay published in the *North American Review* in 1903 which is loosely based on Eliot’s ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.’ Whilst Wharton’s essay certainly deals with reading, it is concerned more deeply with her literary reception, specifically the reception of her forthcoming fiction. She had begun writing her novel *The House of Mirth* September 1903, the month before ‘The Vice of Reading’ was published.¹⁴⁰ I read ‘The Vice of Reading,’ an essay in which Wharton aligns herself with the figure of the high-class male scientist-author, as an attempt to influence the reception of her first major work and as an expression of her

¹³³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 46.

¹³⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 47.

¹³⁵ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 47.

¹³⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 52; Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 45.

¹³⁷ See Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, pp. 45-6; Benstock, p. 46.

¹³⁸ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 46.

¹³⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁰ See Benstock, p. 139.

anxiety about how critics would respond to it. In this article, she draws repeatedly on language and imagery which can be traced back to Eliot's essay.

'The Vice of Reading' sees Wharton attempting to invert the negative class associations with reading and writing, showing them to be indicative of taste and therefore symptomatic of high class and good breeding. Cleverly, Wharton applies the established gender hierarchy associated with literary engagement in the process of making this inversion. In breaking reading (and implicitly authorship) into two distinct gendered classes, she aligns herself with the figure of the high-class, elite male intellectual whilst also endorsing prejudice against women in the literary sphere. Given that Eliot also presented herself as an exception amongst 'average' female authors, it is fitting that Wharton should use Eliot's essay as a template. A great deal of the vocabulary about 'average' readers in Wharton's essay, as well as her approach to distinguishing herself from them, can be seen in Eliot's essay: we recall that Eliot presents herself and a select few as exceptions to the rule of the 'average' or 'ordinary intellectual level' of woman, of the 'mass of feminine literature,' and the 'trashy' novels with which women writers and readers were associated.¹⁴¹ Both writers concur that 'average' writers who write for narcissistic reasons alone should 'abstain from writing' for the sake of their fellow female authors.¹⁴²

One of the main points of disagreement between Wharton's and Eliot's essays centres on Eliot's claim that superior forms of authorship are attainable by those who are committed to self-culture.¹⁴³ By contrast, the central point of 'The Vice of Reading' is that active, intellectually engaged reading (and implicitly authorship) is dependent on innate qualities which come from good breeding. 'The gift of reading is no exception to the rule that all natural gifts need to be cultivated by practice and discipline,' Wharton admits, but emphasises that 'unless the innate aptitude exists the training will be wasted.'¹⁴⁴ Wharton here evokes biological determinism to support her argument. Darwinian theory, which was being developed and refined by subsequent theorists at the turn of the century, stipulated that particular mental and physical characteristics could be preserved in certain communities by selective breeding. Only individuals such as Wharton herself, the 'Happy Few' whose minds have been kept fertile by such selectivity, have the capacity to let literature 'strike root.'¹⁴⁵ To

¹⁴¹ Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', pp. 155, 162.

¹⁴² Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', p. 162.

¹⁴³ Easley, *First Person Anonymous*, p. 119.

¹⁴⁴ Edith Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', *North American Review*, 177 (Oct. 1903), 513-21, repr. in Frederick Wegener, ed. *The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 100.

¹⁴⁵ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', pp. 105, 102.

refer back to Wharton's letter to Robert Grant in 1907, the reading aptitude is 'congenital.'¹⁴⁶ The quality of the education meted out to Wharton and her male cohorts allows the 'intertwin[ing]' of 'branches,' but it is the soil, the foundation of the mind which belongs to the 'born reader' that anchors their responses to literature and ensures that the plant will survive and flourish into a tree.¹⁴⁷

Whilst the metaphor of the plant and the question of whether it can survive in the mental soil of the 'mechanical reader' is likely a reflection of the writings of Darwin, who produced a whole series of books dedicated to plant life, this metaphor can also be traced back to Eliot's 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,' where she writes that 'the average nature of women is too shallow and feeble a soil to bear much tillage.'¹⁴⁸

Wharton also subtly evokes Eliot's essay by poking fun at a list of women who engage with literature in what she deems a redundant, even counter-productive way. Though Wharton does not explicitly identify the 'average' reader, or 'mechanical reader' as she frequently terms it, as female, the figures she uses to represent this reader – a housekeeper, an unnamed lady who dislikes Balzac, Mrs. Barbauld who famously described Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* as 'improbable,' and another unnamed lady who produces a 'borrowed opinion' about the historical novel *Quo Vadis* – are clearly female.¹⁴⁹ If these clues are insufficient, Wharton describes the 'mechanical' reader in terms which recall the nineteenth-century stereotype of the unthinking, passive female reader.

To the mechanical reader, books once read are not like growing things that strike root and intertwine branches, but like fossils ticketed and put away in the drawers of a geologist's cabinet; or rather, like prisoners condemned to lifelong solitary confinement. In such a mind the books never talk to each other.¹⁵⁰

Wharton presents the female reader labelling fossils and tidying them away into drawers; a domestic image of acquisition, which undermines the scientific association and which recalls Eliot's criticism in 'Silly Novels' that for the 'average' female author, 'knowledge remains acquisition, instead of passing into culture.'¹⁵¹

Significant also is that the female reader is domesticising and therefore feminising a scientific, masculine pursuit in this excerpt. This was an anxiety particular to the climate in

¹⁴⁶ Letter to Robert Grant, Nov. 19 [1907], in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, Lewis and Lewis, p. 124.

¹⁴⁷ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 102.

¹⁴⁸ Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', p. 155.

¹⁴⁹ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', pp. 101, 102-3.

¹⁵⁰ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', pp. 102.

¹⁵¹ Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', p. 155.

which Wharton was writing: whereas in 1856, British literary commentators were anxious about the increasing presence of female writers, and thus Eliot chose to class herself amongst talented female authors who resisted the contemporary stereotype, critics of Wharton's generation were preoccupied with the issue of female mass readership and its impact on – or, to be more specific, its hindrance of – superior forms of authorship which were deemed masculine in American literary criticism. This anxiety was voiced clearly in 1887 by Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, a Norwegian-American literary commentator who was worried that since the success of a novel was dependent on its popularity, talented male authors were making 'concessions' to the tastes of the young women who made up the majority of the reading masses. The male author, he writes,

discusses dress with elaborate minuteness, and enters, with a truly feminine enthusiasm, into the mysteries of the toilet. He shuns large questions and problems because his audience is chiefly interested in small questions and problems. He avoids everything which requires thought, because, rightly or wrongly, thought is not supposed to be the ladies' *forte*. Their education has not trained them for independent reflection.¹⁵²

Wharton's essay agrees. She explains that 'mechanical' readers become a 'menace' when their influence works to invert the literary hierarchy established in elite literary circles: she accuses them of 'facilitat[ing] the career of the mediocre author' by 'bringing about the demand for mediocre writing. The 'mechanical' reader's 'gravest offence' is 'luring creative talent into the ranks of mechanical production' by making it popular and lucrative. In this way, the reader 'retards true culture and lessens the possible amount of really abiding work.'¹⁵³

As Wharton wrote about reading, then, she was evidently thinking about authorship. This can be seen not only in the direct link made between reading and authorship as described in the previous paragraph, but it is also implicit in Wharton's characterisation of the female reader herself: Wharton's references to the female reader's inability to distinguish between 'merely episodic features' and 'the whole' in her reading recalls a stereotypical "feminine" flaw attributed to female writers in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵⁴ This reader's engagement with the written word is 'purpose[less]' and 'inane' like the intellectually redundant works of her writing counterpart; she 'consum[es]' 'trash' which 'require[s] no effort beyond turning

¹⁵² Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, 'Why We Have No Great Novelists', *Forum*, 2 (Feb. 1887), 615-22, repr. in 'The American Novelist and His Public', in *Literary and Social Silhouettes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894), pp. 41-2.

¹⁵³ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 104.

¹⁵⁴ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 104.

the pages and using one's eyes,' just as the lady novelist unthinkingly churned out unoriginal, imitative literature.¹⁵⁵ There is also a clear sense in which the female reader is a poor imitation of the elite intellectual reader, just as the female writer was often dubbed an imitator of her male counterparts: 'The man who grinds the barrel-organ does not challenge comparison with Paderewski,' writes Wharton, 'but the mechanical reader never doubts his intellectual competency.'¹⁵⁶ We recall Eliot writing that the 'silly' female author 'is unable to discern the difference between her own style' and that of 'great men' 'as a Yorkshireman is to discern the difference between his own English and a Londoner's.'¹⁵⁷ Without the taste or innate acumen that belongs to upper-class men to fully understand and engage with a piece of literature, the 'mechanical' female reader cannot discern between high and low-quality reading material, and as a result, she gorges herself on dead material, 'fossils' or 'trash.'¹⁵⁸

'To read is not a virtue,' says Wharton, 'but to read well is an art, and an art that only the born reader can acquire.'¹⁵⁹ To return to the metaphor of the tilled soil in 'Silly Novels,' only the 'born novelist,' a phrase Wharton uses in *A Backward Glance*,¹⁶⁰ has the mind, made fertile by their breeding and gender, for the roots of their reading to flourish into high-quality literary creations. According to Wharton's argument, reading, and by extension the authorship which stems from reading, should be practised by a minority, the 'Happy Few' Wharton evokes at the end of the essay and amongst whom she implicitly numbers herself.¹⁶¹

This essay not only serves to insist on Wharton's masculinised high-class artistic identity, but, apparently as a result of apprehension about her forthcoming novel *The House of Mirth*, it also conveniently dismisses prospective negative criticism of the work. She bluntly dismisses criticism of what she deems works of high-quality literature by explaining it as a lack of understanding on the part of the reader: he 'learns the potency of disapproval as a critical weapon, and it soon becomes his chief defence against the irritating demand to admire what he cannot understand.'¹⁶² To criticise Wharton's fiction, then, is to open oneself up to the accusation of being a 'mechanical reader:' that is, ignorant and lower-class.

¹⁵⁵ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', pp. 99, 101.

¹⁵⁶ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 100.

¹⁵⁷ Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', p. 155.

¹⁵⁸ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', pp. 99, 100, 102.

¹⁵⁹ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 100.

¹⁶⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 138.

¹⁶¹ Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 105.

¹⁶² Wharton, 'The Vice of Reading', p. 102.

The Sentimental Lady Novelist and The House of Mirth

So far we have examined how Eliot's literary reception in America at the turn of the century impacted on Wharton's ideas about authorship, and how she used Eliot as a point of reference from which to experiment with a range of artistic identities, both aligning herself with and distancing herself from Eliot. We have also looked at how she deals with and updates some of the explicit arguments Eliot makes about authorship in 'Silly Novels.' In order to gain more of an insight into Wharton's ideas about female authorship, we now look at Wharton's response to Eliot's arguments on this issue through her appropriation of the figure of the reading woman in her fiction. Her female readers are more complex and revealing than her explicit writings about reading and authorship. In Wharton's female reader-writers, namely her revisions of Gwendolen Harleth in *The House of Mirth*, and of Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke in *The Fruit of the Tree*, we can trace how she appropriates and revises Eliot's ideal of female authorship, and identify how, and in what form, Wharton's own anxieties about her gender and her vocation arise.

One of Eliot's techniques for defending female authorship is to insist through her female readers on the moral and social importance of what some branches of literary criticism continued to identify as feminine literature and feminine literary engagement. We remember that Eliot's defence of romance as a genre came in response to the devalued status of the romance in literary criticism; it was the much maligned feminine and therefore inferior form of fiction which was held up in contrast to masculine realism.

At the time when Wharton was writing *The House of Mirth* (1905), the novel which established her as one of the foremost literary talents in America, it is clear that she was experimenting with a 'feminine' literary persona, and considering what this identification might mean for her and her art. In this novel, Wharton incorporates Eliot's argument about the moral importance of feminine reading, through which she justified the need for feminine modes of authorship, into *The House of Mirth*. At the same time, Wharton undercuts this idea through the use of competing, contradictory representations of her heroine Lily Bart as a feminine reader-author: Wharton cannot decide if the tragedy of her novel is the degradation of Lily's feminine art, or the fact that as a woman, she is not allowed to transcend it. Whereas for Eliot, the feminine reader-author was associated with romance, for Wharton this figure is associated with sentimental literature.

The House of Mirth is unique amongst Wharton's writing for its sympathetic presentation of Lily Bart as a sentimental reader-author. The validation of sentimental literature comes from Lily's presentation as a sentimental reader in the broad sense Wharton

uses that she is an unintellectual reader of low-grade, feminine reading material. Like her counterpart Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*, she enjoys ‘sentimental fiction’ and popular works like *Omar Khayyam*.¹⁶³ She reads cheap newspapers, and railway and magazine fiction (17, 23, 34), and though she is familiar with classical writers like Aeschylus, whose Furies she evokes after Trenor’s rape attempt (117),¹⁶⁴ these works have little bearing on the narrative. It is the sentimental, low-grade fiction in which she indulges that inform her expectations and personal standards of behaviour throughout the novel.

Unlike Eliot’s Gwendolen Harleth, however, Lily’s sentimental reading makes her the most moral character in the text. Wharton uses Lily’s sensibility not only as a marker of high breeding, but as an indicator of her capacity for feeling and empathy. This is reminiscent of Eliot’s fiction and the feeling instilled in her female characters through their reading of romantic literature. As in Eliot’s fiction, where romance reading is defended, Wharton elevates sentimental literature by insisting that it is morally and socially necessary. As Hildegard Hoeller notes, Wharton suggests that it is only the ‘vein of sentiment’ in Lily, ‘transmitted’ to her from reading her father’s fiction, the ‘dingy volumes’ described ‘vaguely’ and dismissively by her mother as ‘poetry’ (30), that accounts for the moral decisions she makes over the course of the narrative.¹⁶⁵ In a cut-and-thrust world of financial and sexual exchange, Lily’s moral decisions are driven by an acute sensibility. When publicly accused of ‘imprudence’ with a married man by Bertha Dorset, ‘compassion [gets] the better of her;’ she thinks of Bertha as a poor ‘creature’ in need of help and she ‘tak[es] the brunt of it quietly’ (162). At every point in the narrative where Lily considers using the letters to blackmail Bertha, she is presented recoiling from the act, the predominant adjective to describe her feeling being ‘disgust.’ Her final attempt to approach Bertha with the letters ‘chill[s] her blood with shame’ (237). So strong is Lily’s feeling for others, that she cannot bring herself to act against them, even if she does so to her own detriment. Like many of Eliot’s female heroines, she chooses to suffer in silence, a choice which in Eliot’s fiction and *The House of Mirth* is emphatically a moral one.

¹⁶³ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Norton, 1990), pp. 30, 52-3. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the body of the text. Edward Fitzgerald’s translation was in its fourth “popular” edition in 1879. See Christopher Decker’s ‘Introduction’ in *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. xliii.

¹⁶⁴ This echoes the scene in *Daniel Deronda* where Gwendolen receives the ‘poisoned’ diamonds from Lydia Glasher and the chapter ends dramatically with: ‘In some form or other the Furies had crossed [Grandcourt’s] threshold.’ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 303.

¹⁶⁵ Hildegard Hoeller, *Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), p. 111.

As well as a reader of sentimental fiction, *The House of Mirth* contains a narrative thread surrounding the idea of Lily as a sentimental author. As critics have acknowledged, Lily's creativity is directed towards presenting herself in a flattering light to her companions. She is a 'self-creating' object; that is, she is her own artistic medium.¹⁶⁶ Her artistry has all the hallmarks of the work produced by the sentimental lady novelist according to contemporary criticism: it is narcissistic, decorative, ephemeral and has no intellectual value. This stereotypically feminine mode of authorship is also alluded to in the imaginary scenarios Lily conjures up, scenarios in which she is an object of admiration and which recall Gwendolen's self-narrativising in *Daniel Deronda*:

She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste [...] She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich [...] Lily's preference would have been for an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and an hereditary office in the Vatican. Lost causes had a romantic charm for her, and she liked to picture herself as standing aloof from the vulgar press of the Quirinal, and sacrificing her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition... (30)

Where these fantasies are threatened, Lily seeks to write herself into a more accommodating backdrop. For example, when Lawrence Selden fails to visit her as promised, and she is instead confronted with the 'repugnant' Sim Rosedale who attempts to bolster his proposal of marriage with blunt references to her rumoured sexual misconduct and her advancing age, Lily takes refuge in the prospect of a cruise on the Mediterranean with Bertha Dorset, which she imagines will be 'a romantic adventure' (140, 153). We remember that in *Daniel Deronda*, the discovery of her prospective husband's mistress sends Gwendolen Harleth fleeing to Europe to become the 'heroine of the gaming-table' (231). Typical of contemporary representations of the sentimental lady novelist, Gwendolen's and Lily's creative powers do not engage with reality, have a narcissistic basis, and are driven by emotion rather than objective fact. However, unlike Gwendolen, who uses her self-narrativising to turn a blind eye to her husband's immorality and her own immoral conduct in marrying him, Wharton underscores for the reader that Lily never uses her creative powers to abandon her principles. At worst, she feigns ignorance until the facts can no longer be ignored, as we see in her willingness to accept financial help from Gus Trenor without questioning his motives and what might be expected from her in return. It would appear, then,

¹⁶⁶ Wolff, p. 111.

that by revising the moral status of Eliot's heroine, Wharton is making a strong defence of so-called feminine authorship on a moral basis.

The first way in which Wharton uses the idea of Lily as a sentimental author is to argue that the female artist cannot survive in a brutal environment where her sentiment has no worth in the literary marketplace. In this reading, Wharton sets up Lily's 'feminine' morality and feeling against 'masculine' concerns of financial worth – that is, the tangible, the factual, the scientific. Lily is left with two options which epitomise the dilemma faced by the female author of high class. Either Lily must admit defeat and marry, which would require relinquishing her self-narrativising in favour of a conventional, restricted and unartistic existence, or she must transgress her femininity; that is, she must enter the immoral arena of sexual exchange and personal ambition and blackmail her antagonist Bertha Dorset, thereby rewriting the narrative Bertha has written for her. In this environment, one cannot be both a lady and an author.

Since Lily is too feeling and moral to trade on Selden's letters, and avoids marriage until her value is so reduced that she is no longer a viable 'investment' even for Rosedale, her only other choice is to withdraw completely with her values intact. Her last, quiet, "lady-like" act of authorship, the writing of a cheque to Gus Trenor, represents the re-establishment of her financial and sexual integrity.

On the one hand, Lily's tragic suicide laments the devaluation of 'feminine' sentiment in the literary marketplace, but on the other, it demonstrates the need for a different kind of female authorship. As Elaine Showalter notes in 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist),' Lily's downward trajectory in this novel can be seen as Wharton applying her reading about social determinism to announce the death of old forms of female authorship and the necessary emergence of a new 'masculine' breed of female writer – herself: 'If Lily Bart, unable to change, gives way to the presence of a new generation of women, Edith Wharton survives the crisis of maturation at the turn of the century and becomes one of our American pre-cursors of a literary history of female mastery and growth.'¹⁶⁷

This brings me to the second thread of logic surrounding the idea of Lily as a sentimental writer in *The House of Mirth*. In this interpretation, one which dominates in Wharton scholarship, Lily is seen as an author figure restricted to creating inferior,

¹⁶⁷ Elaine Showalter, 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's House of Mirth', *Representations*, 9 (1985), 133-49, p. 147.

sentimental literature because she is a woman.¹⁶⁸ Like Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth, Lily is conscious of '[w]hat a miserable thing it is to be a woman' whose only 'vocation' is 'marriage' (8, 10). We might read Lily as a product of the traditional biological arguments inspired by Herbert Spencer which were used against female intellectual exertion in late nineteenth-century America. Influential works like Spencer's *Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (1860) and American Harvard professor Dr. Edward Clarke's *Sex in Education* (1873), claimed that the female constitution was not designed for mental exertion, as this might 'compromise [women's] reproductive capacity.'¹⁶⁹ This included the diminishing of a woman's attractive features; a fault from which, as the narrator of *The House of Mirth* repeatedly reminds us, Lily does not suffer. The only art-forms acceptable for women like Lily reinforces their predestination for wifehood and motherhood; roles which 'at heart' Lily 'despises' (148), hence the repeated pattern of self-sabotage and withdrawal that takes place with each of Lily's attempts to procure a rich husband.¹⁷⁰ At home with her aunt Peniston, the reading made available to her consists of dated 'copy-book axioms' from the early 1850s which dictate established ideas about female behaviour and women's social role still at work in that household (9-10).

Recalling how Daniel Deronda introduces Gwendolen to a new world of superior, 'masculine' literature in Eliot's novel, including works by 'Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Butler, Burke [and] Guizot' through which she seeks an avenue into her mentor's consciousness,¹⁷¹ Wharton presents Lawrence Selden as a representative of an intellectual world from which Lily, as a woman, is barred access. The novel indicates that it is to Selden's intellectual 'republic' that Lily wishes to gain entry (57). It is significant that her first indiscretion in the novel involves her entering Selden's library, a sexual transgression in the superficial sense that she is without a chaperone, but also in the figurative sense that she is invading male intellectual territory. In contrast to the cheap reading material she has access to over the course of the novel, which the narrative implicitly presents as disposable, fashionable and intellectually lightweight, Selden's books, with their 'ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco' (10), have the mark of high quality, age and intellectual worth.

¹⁶⁸ Amy Kaplan describes Lily as an 'artist manqué' and Elaine Showalter sees her as the embodiment of the 'cramped possibilities of the lady whose creative roles are defined and controlled by men.' Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, p. 83; Showalter, 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist)', p. 135. See also Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 17; and Nyquist, p. 54.

¹⁶⁹ See Elizabeth Seymour Eschbach, *The Higher Education of Women in England and America 1865-1920* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), pp. 83-4.

¹⁷⁰ See Nyquist, p. 85.

¹⁷¹ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, pp. 467-8.

Selden's library is reminiscent of Wharton's description of her father's library, containing the 'essentials' onto which she was 'thr[own]' by her mother, as she reports in *A Backward Glance*. 'By denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish, my mother threw me back on the great classics, and thereby helped to give my mind a temper which my too-easy studies could not have produced,' Wharton writes.¹⁷² She goes on to list the great classics which she found in her father's library: works of history, collections of letters, drama and poetry, almost universally written by men. Similarly, the first book Lily chances upon in Selden's library (but significantly, does not read) is a volume by the seventeenth-century French satirist La Bruyère, who critiqued his social milieu and its mores (11).¹⁷³ Selden, being a man, can buy and read intellectual works by writers like La Bruyère if he so pleases; he can look 'shabby' and live alone, as Lily points out (12, 8), and cultivate this intellectual space for himself without forfeiting his place in their social circle. The fact that Lily's presence is a potential social hazard allows Wharton to attack the idea that a woman's desire to engage with intellectually-heavy texts is a sexual transgression. Lily's death conveys the idea that high-class women with intellectual potential are driven to extinction by rigid social rules about gender and literary engagement.

The House of Mirth indicates that Wharton could not reconcile herself with the idea of embracing a feminine artistic identity. Never again in her fiction do we find a sympathetic portrayal of a sentimental reader-artist. This can be accounted for partly in the critical response to the novel. It was a runaway bestseller, and praise of the novel was almost uniform. 'That this is one of the strongest pieces of writing that has appeared in this country for many a day is pretty nearly the unanimous verdict of the newspaper critics,' reported the *Literary Digest* in December 1905. Described as 'a giant among pigmies,' compared to the tragedies of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, *The House of Mirth* earned Wharton the title of 'the best of living American novelists.'¹⁷⁴ The question of Wharton's gender continued to arise in several reviews, with her achievements often being articulated in terms of Wharton's

¹⁷² Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 45.

¹⁷³ See Edward C. Knox, *Jean de la Bruyère* (New York: Twayne, 1973), esp. p. 119.

¹⁷⁴ 'The Abode of the Fool's Heart', p. 121; Katherine Fullerton Gerould, 'Mrs. Wharton's New *House of Mirth*', *New York Times Book Review* (Jul. 23 1922), 1, 3, repr. in James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, ed. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 307.

‘masculine power.’¹⁷⁵ The pressure to reproduce this ‘masculine’ masterpiece was understandably enormous.¹⁷⁶

At this point, Wharton turned to the central argument that Eliot makes through her female readers, that the ideal female author is androgynous, in an effort to reconcile her gender with her desire to produce ‘masculine’ literature. Wharton’s adopts this argument in her next novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), a work inspired by *Middlemarch*, where we find the strongest case for an androgynous approach to reading and authorship in Eliot’s fiction.

The Androgynous Female Reader-Author in The Fruit of the Tree

Wharton scholars widely regard *The Fruit of Tree* as an ambitious failure. Begun in November 1905, the same year of the serial run and the publication of the record-breaking *The House of Mirth* (January to November, and October respectively), the consensus among Wharton’s scholars is that the main fault of the novel is that it contains too many ideas.¹⁷⁷ Ann Jurecic has identified four different novels within *The Fruit of the Tree*: an industrial novel, a psychological novel, a novel which centres on Justine Brent and the consequences of her moral decision to euthanise Bessy, and a domestic novel all competing within its pages.¹⁷⁸ It explores the themes of industrial reform, the woman question and the ethics of euthanasia.¹⁷⁹ In this work, nurse Justine Brent, the tragic heroine of the piece who is passionate about social reform, euthanises Bessy Amherst, née Westmore, after she is paralysed due to a fall from a horse. Justine subsequently marries Bessy’s widowed husband, John Amherst, a mill-owner who is also passionate about social reform for his workers, but once he discovers her act the marriage all but disintegrates. That ‘Edith Wharton seems not to have been quite sure what she was up to in this 630-page novel,’ writes R. W. B. Lewis in his biography, is indicated by ‘the succession of unrelated alternative titles she proposed before settling for the least communicative of them all.’¹⁸⁰ Progress writing the novel was unusually slow, with Wharton repeatedly abandoning the novel to work on other projects.¹⁸¹ It suffered from poor sales in comparison with *The House of Mirth*, and by the 1920s was almost

¹⁷⁵ Gerould, p. 307.

¹⁷⁶ The lucrative contracts Wharton signed for *The Fruit of the Tree* were based on the ‘incipient popularity’ of *The House of Mirth*, and she and her publishers were expecting a repetition of her success. Wharton was even hoping to surpass sales of *The House of Mirth* with her new novel. See Benstock, pp. 146, 154.

¹⁷⁷ See Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 181; Jurecic, pp. 33, 51n11.

¹⁷⁸ Jurecic, p. 33.

¹⁷⁹ Benstock, p. 154.

¹⁸⁰ Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 181.

¹⁸¹ Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 170; Benstock, pp. 154-5.

entirely forgotten.¹⁸² Wharton scholarship has tended to neglect the work, mentioning it in passing if at all.

The three central characters of *The Fruit of the Tree* recall the Dorothea-Rosamond-Lydgate triangle in *Middlemarch*, and the novel envisions what might have happened if Rosamond had died, and the two characters passionate for social reform, Dorothea and Lydgate, had married.

Like *Middlemarch*, *The Fruit of the Tree* is distinguished from Wharton's other novels as being the text that makes the clearest case for an androgynous ideal of female authorship. However, as we found with *The House of Mirth*, there are contradictory narrative threads surrounding the figure of the female author at work within this novel which ultimately bring Wharton's commitment to Eliot's androgynous model into question.

The Fruit of the Tree is a novel of social reform, and Wharton's representations of female readers in this work reflect strongly on contemporary debates about women's social status, standards of female education, and female authorship. In this novel Wharton purposefully juxtaposes Bessy Westmore, a poorly educated upper-class woman who reads very little, with nurse Justine Brent, an androgynous Dorothea Brooke figure. Through Justine's displacement of Bessy, Wharton shows that social progress and, on a more symbolic level, intellectual female authorship, are dependent on the demise of the traditional form of femininity and feminine literary engagement presented by Bessy, and the emergence of the more androgynous New Woman and reader-author presented by Justine Brent.

There is only one scene in the novel where Bessy is presented engaging with literature, and this occurs indirectly, with her husband reading to her from his book collection. Immediately, we have the suggestion that Bessy's exposure to literature has been guided and curbed by patriarchal figures. Bessy's engagement with literature is emphatically feminine in the contemporary pejorative sense of the word; that is, passive, unintellectual, emotional, and narcissistic. She has a 'misleading preference' for poetry which Amherst tries to encourage: Amherst reports how she 'lean[s] back with dreaming lids and lovely parted lips while he rolled out the immortal measures; but her outward signs of attention never ripened into any expression of opinion, or any after-allusion to what she had heard.' We understand then that she has no appreciation for the ideas raised by the poetry nor for its technical accomplishments, but simply enjoys the fleeting feelings the words inspire in her (again, we have the opposition between intellectual literary engagement and emotion). To

¹⁸² Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, p. 180; Benstock, p. 393.

‘any references outside the small circle of daily facts,’ Bessy’s response is ‘lack[ing]’ – only in his discussions with Justine is Amherst ‘restored [...] to some semblance of mental activity.’¹⁸³

Bessy’s decidedly unintellectual and self-centred link with the written word is accounted for in Wharton’s description of Bessy as

one of the most harrowing victims of the plan of bringing up our girls in the double bondage of expediency and unreality, corrupting their bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment, and leaving them to reconcile the two as best they can, or lose their souls in the attempt. (281)

In short, Bessy has been brought up to see the world narrowly through her own superficial desires. The reference to ‘sentiment’ is a telling choice of vocabulary, being associated for Wharton with feminine texts that fuel pleasant, narcissistic fantasies; such works, like the poetry Amherst reads to her, correspond to a world in which Bessy is ‘corrupt[ed]’ by ‘luxury,’ in which every wish is granted. Without exposure to the real world outside of the ‘small circle of daily facts’ that comprise her experience of reality, Bessy has built up her understanding of herself, of others and the wider world based on the unrealistic romantic expectations implanted in her by her scant reading and education, and by her sheltered upbringing.

Like Eliot’s poorly read heroines – Hetty Sorrel, Gwendolen Harleth, and of course Rosamond Vincy – Bessy’s lack of reading results in a lack of empathy, and following on from Eliot’s model, for Wharton, a lack of empathy is not only socially dangerous but socially disabling for the individual. In her tour of the mill, the poor working conditions leave no sense of suffering on Bessy’s mind; it is only when she learns that a worker is so badly injured he may not work again, and she considers that his wife will be poor as a result – the position of a poor wife being one that frightens Bessy – that she shows any signs of empathy (61-2, 64-5). Neither is reason Bessy’s province: she ‘forms all of her opinions emotionally’ (87), we are told. The narrative details how her love of luxury drains away resources that otherwise would have been used by Amherst to reform the dangerous conditions of the mill, recalling how Rosamond’s over-spending sends Lydgate into severe debt in *Middlemarch*.

Even more alarming is Bessy’s lack of identity: incapable of empathy, she is also incapable of seeing perspectives and social structures outside her own narrow viewpoint, and she cannot conceive of herself beyond her immediate ideological environment. Bessy’s

¹⁸³ Edith Wharton, *The Fruit of the Tree* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), p. 320. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

upbringing, combined with her culturally endorsed narrow reading practices, deny her the opportunity to enter onto the 'staging ground' for rehearsing alternative identities that Barbara Sicherman and Mary Kelley argue is so important to female 'self-fashioning.'¹⁸⁴ Just as Rosamond is 'an actress of parts' who plays her own 'so well, that she d[oes] not know it to be precisely her own,'¹⁸⁵ Bessy is 'a chameleon,' 'taking everybody's colour in the most flattering way, and giving back [...] a most charming reflection [...] but when one got her by herself, with no reflections to catch, one found she hadn't any particular colour of her own' (150). Bessy's engagement with literature is socially and morally damaging. Rather than an equal, like Justine, Bessy becomes a burden to Amherst, a beautiful woman-child designed for marriage and child-rearing but not for a fulfilling, equal, mutually gratifying relationship.

Wharton's revision of the horse-riding accident in *Middlemarch* demonstrates her understanding of the significance of the incident. Like Rosamond, who is also subject to her own selfish whims, Bessy injures herself falling from a horse named Impulse after being expressly forbidden to go riding by her husband. However, while Rosamond Vincy miscarries, Bessy is paralysed. In *Fruit*, Bessy's fall from a horse demonstrates the destructiveness of her 'feminine' reading practices and art, for which both she herself and her culture are at fault. In a state of paralysis after her fall, her limited 'half-formed' mental life becomes physicalised (414).

In representations of socially-unaware and unempathetic readers like Bessy, Wharton is not only thinking of Eliot's fiction, but she is also tapping into a branch of criticism which was firmly established in America by the end of the nineteenth century, which saw the reformed reading practices of the nation as a means of cultural progress. At a time when private reading was increasingly viewed as a means of self-improvement, critics like Charles Eliot Norton, who felt that the education system was failing to inculcate the American people with a sense of civic duty, were claiming that social progress in America was dependent on private reading.¹⁸⁶ In a similar vein, influential critic William Dean Howells promoted female suffrage and female social equality on the basis that cultural progress was dependent on solidarity with all sections of America.¹⁸⁷ *The Fruit of the Tree* combines these arguments:

¹⁸⁴ Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition', p. 78; Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading', pp. 54-5.

¹⁸⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 109.

¹⁸⁶ Norton sees the private reading practices of the nation as a means of 'disciplin[ing]' the individual's 'moral nature' and 'intellectual faculties,' thus promoting an anti-materialist outlook and 'moral excellence.' Charles Eliot Norton, 'The Intellectual Life of America', *New Princeton Review* (1888), pp. 317-8, 324. For ideas about private reading and self-improvement, see Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility', p. 214.

¹⁸⁷ See, for example, William Dean Howells, 'Editor's Easy Chair', *Harper's*, 136 (Dec. 1917), 450-53, p. 453, and Howells, 'Editor's Easy Chair', *Harper's*, 111 (Oct. 1905), 794-7.

Wharton shifts the focus of the self-improvement offered by literature and higher education standards into a feminist sphere by prompting readers to consider the impact of narrow reading practices on women, and what it means not only for the individual, but women in society as a whole. Bessy's poor standards of reading and education not only limit her, but are damaging to her marriage and the wider community.

Wharton proffers a viable alternative to Bessy's existence in the guise of Justine Brent, the most positive representation of the androgynous female reader-author to be found in her fiction. In Justine, Wharton creates a New Woman who combines all femininity in all its aspects (sexuality, maternity, and sympathy in accordance with contemporary thought) with intellectual acumen and creativity; a woman who, out of kindness, releases the Old Girl from her meaningless, painful existence and announces the arrival of a new model of womanhood and female literary engagement. Justine proves to Amherst that 'warm personal sympathy' is not her 'sex's destined contribution to the broad work of human beneficence,' but rather sympathy combined with scientific acumen: 'It was wonderful, again, how she grasped what he was doing in the mills,' Amherst remarks. '[S]he wanted to know the how and why of each case, to hear what conclusions he drew from his results, to what solutions his experiments pointed' (458). The language is pointedly scientific, indicating Justine's place amongst the elite thinkers of her age. As well as an intellectual, socially aware reader, Justine is also a maternal and sexual being: Justine cares deeply for Amherst and Bessy's daughter, Cicely, who dotes on her in return; later in the novel, at the sound of Amherst's voice, 'the primitive woman in [Justine] glow[s] at contact with the primitive man' (530-1). Justine is 'the mate of [his] mind' as well as his body (464), an emotional and intellectual companion.

By contrast to Bessy, Justine Brent is a highly educated and well-read woman. She is a 'flame-devourer of the page' (evidence suggests Wharton also 'devoure[d]' books)¹⁸⁸ and seeks solace in serious, intellectual works: 'the English poets, the Greek dramatists, some text-books of biology and kindred subjects, and a few stray well-worn volumes: Lecky's European Morals, Carlyle's translation of Wilhelm Meister, Seneca, Epictetus, a German grammar, a pocket Bacon' (319, 398-9). Once more, we are transported to Wharton's father's library, filled with 'the essentials' written by canonical male authors.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ In his biography, Percy Lubbock describes Wharton 'violating, gutting, savaging' the books she read. See Lubbock, p. 171.

¹⁸⁹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 45.

There is a subtle nod to Maggie Tulliver escaping into the attic to read in *The Mill on the Floss* in Wharton's presentation of Justine's reading as an 'escap[e]' from the strictures placed on her identity as a woman.

Sometimes she took up one of the books and read a page or two, letting the beat of the verse lull her throbbing brain, or the strong words of stoic wisdom sink into her heart. And even when there was no time for these brief flights from reality, it soothed her to feel herself in the presence of great thoughts – to know that in this room, among these books, another restless baffled mind had sought escape from the “dusty answer” of life. (399)¹⁹⁰

For Justine, books are a space in which she is free to express and explore her own female identity free from social strictures which enforce the identity of the 'lady' upon her. Justine does not feel that she 'belong[s]' to 'any society' (141). She describes herself as an actor in the wrong stage-setting, commenting that 'fate had held her imprisoned in a circle of well-to-do mediocrity' (151). Bantering with Amherst at the Gaines garden party, she tells him that she's 'disguised as a lady,' but is glad '[he] saw through [it],' explaining it makes her feel 'less of a sham, less [dishonest]' (161). Through her reading, she comes to understand the logic which leads her culture to impose this kind of image on her, and she is also equipped to cultivate an identity independent of mainstream thinking. In this way, Wharton uses her female reader to demonstrate the psychological imperative of unrestricted reading (and self-education) for women.

Highlighting the social benefits of intellectual, well-educated women, Wharton presents Justine thinking in moralised terms. Such is her empathy with Bessy that she chooses to end her suffering in spite of the personal cost of her actions; and even when her relationship with Amherst is falling apart, Wharton describes with pointed reference to reading how Justine thinks of the people at the mill for whom she and Amherst have been working together:

When this ordeal was over she returned to the drawing-room and took up a book. It chanced to be a new volume on labour problems, which Amherst must have brought back with him from Westmore; and it carried her thoughts instantly to the mills. Would this disaster poison their work there as well as their personal relation? Would he think of her carrying contamination even into the task their love had illumined? (527)

¹⁹⁰ Compare this to the passage in *The Mill on the Floss* where Maggie escapes into the attic to read: 'She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness [...] her brain would be busy with wild romances of flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary: she would go to some great man – Walter Scott perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her.' George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 287.

The implication that Justine's active reading practices prompt her to consider the lives of others recalls Eliot's realist aesthetic, in which she describes how reading is a necessary means of enlarging the individual's capacity for empathy, and of shaping them into a socially productive citizen.

Justine's status as an androgynous ideal, the acceptable literary identity that Wharton had been seeking, is suggested in the brief, but explicit representation of Justine as an author towards the close of the novel. After a romantic disappointment in her youth, she remembers how she 'medicine[d] her despair' by 'writing the history of a damsel similarly wronged. In her tale, the heroine killed herself; but the author, saved by this vicarious sacrifice, lived, and in time even smiled over her manuscript' (554). We recall that Wharton herself had killed off a heroine only two years earlier and had 'lived to smile in pride over her best-selling novel.'¹⁹¹ We also note, in hindsight, that the murder of Bessy is prefigured in Justine's writing;¹⁹² we might see this as an indication that we should read Justine's actions, and their consequences, in the context of authorship. If in *The House of Mirth*, the sentimental reader-author is destroyed by the new generation of female writers, *The Fruit of the Tree* puts a more positive spin on this transition, showing the socially-unproductive, useless model of old femininity and feminine literary engagement giving way to a more proactive, intellectual, androgynous model of female authorship.

The narrative also hints that we should read Justine as an author figure by giving Justine an occupation, nursing, which had much in common with that of authorship in the early twentieth century. As Katherine Joslin has pointed out, Justine comes from an upper-class background like Wharton but 'has sunk into the prosaic middle class of work and responsibility' through her choice of vocation.¹⁹³ As we have seen, there was a tension between the expectations of Wharton's social set and her desire to pursue a career as an author. Furthermore, as Ann Jurecic notes, a career in nursing had only recently become open to middle-class women, and at the turn of the century the role still seemed suspect. Nursing was deemed unnatural by some because they saw the role of a paid caregiver as the commodification of innate female sentiment. Moreover, they also saw nurses as trespassing onto male professional medical territory.¹⁹⁴ Like the female author, nurse Brent is suspended somewhere between the poles of serious 'masculine' science and 'feminine' sentiment,

¹⁹¹ Jurecic, p. 48.

¹⁹² Jurecic, p. 49.

¹⁹³ Katherine Joslin, 'Architectonic or Episodic? Gender and *The Fruit of the Tree*', in *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, ed. Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 67.

¹⁹⁴ Jurecic, p. 41.

belonging wholly to neither. As a medical practitioner she must eschew emotional responses in favour of scientific reasoning and action; yet her conclusions and actions are always subject to male approval, as traditionally a nurse worked under a male doctor.¹⁹⁵

Wharton is anxious to delineate where exactly Justine fits within this binary scheme. Interestingly, she is inconsistent in her presentation of Justine as a sentimental character, and this is where the androgynous ideal begins to falter. At the start of the novel, Justine is asked about the family of the injured worker Dillon, and she is so upset by the turn of events that she has to pause to steady her voice. She declares she's unfit to be a nurse because she feels too much for her patients: 'I shall live and die a wretched sentimentalist!' she says angrily, 'dash[ing] at the tears on her veil' (13). Nearer the middle of the novel, she declares that she 'dislike[s] sentimentality' (240) and finds herself more attracted to Amherst than another suitor, Wyant, because of the latter's emotional temperament (274). By the end of the novel, however, Justine finds herself at the mercy of her emotions once more: 'She always sympathized too much with her patients – she knew it was a joint in her armour' (388) writes Wharton. Sentiment is also key in Justine's mercy-killing, which is prompted by sympathy: at the sound of Bessy's cries of pain, 'the kind of sound that a compassionate hand would instinctively crush into silence,' Justine hears 'an inner voice, and its pleading shook her heart' (431, 433). Her decision to end Bessy's life may be read as Justine's effort to negotiate between the competing pulls of 'masculine' scientific professionalism and 'feminine' sympathy. As Jurecic writes, Justine sees Wyant's desire to sustain Bessy's life as being borne of professional ambition rather than out of regard for the patient. 'Justine must thus decide between her allegiance to the doctor or the patient,'¹⁹⁶ two characters who represent the opposing gendered modes of authorship Wharton is trying to ascribe to her heroine. Ultimately, sentiment wins out; and at this point, Wharton's idealisation of Justine starts to unravel.

The emotional-sexual-intellectual harmony between Amherst and Justine, who marry after Bessy's death, is brief and breaks down when Amherst discovers the truth about Bessy's demise. Justine tries to justify the killing on the basis of Amherst's notes on 'a little volume of Bacon' which she reads in the scene before she euthanises Bessy:

'La vraie morale se moque de la morale... We perish because we follow other men's examples... Socrates called the opinions of many Lamiae. – Good God!' he exclaimed, flinging the book from him

¹⁹⁵ Jurecic, pp. 40-1.

¹⁹⁶ Jurecic, p. 38.

with a gesture of abhorrence [...] He looked at her coldly, almost apprehensively, as if she had grown suddenly dangerous and remote. (523-4)

The French quotation comes from the seventeenth-century philosopher Pascal's *Pensées* (1669), in a section which argues that we must use our own judgement when it comes to moral choices; true morality is not reliant on external imperatives, but produces its own set of moral standards through independent reasoning. Justine, then, has (mis)applied the logic of a canonical philosopher, one of the classic thinkers enshrined by contemporary literary authorities, to commit what Amherst and American law deem a monstrous act – to abuse a professional position which many commentators thought should be exclusively male. 'I did nothing but what your own reason, your own arguments have justified a hundred times!' (522-3) Justine protests to Amherst.

If we relate this back to the idea of Justine as an author, we find a disconcerting undercutting of Wharton's androgynous female reader-writer ideal. By encouraging Justine's engagement with such material – material which she cannot intelligently apply, only unthinkingly imitate – Amherst has created, in his mind, a kind of social monster capable of taking life. It is significant also that the casualty of this fall should be the old model of unthinking femininity Wharton was trying to remove from its pedestal.

Justine is punished by being reduced from a positive portrait of an androgynous reader-author to an unthinking, socially dangerous, imitative reader-author; in short, to the negative stereotype of female literary engagement which remained prevalent in contemporary literary criticism. Ultimately, Justine and Amherst are reunited, but by allowing Amherst to continue to idealise his late wife as a selfless advocate of social reform (he mistakes Bessy's blueprints for a pleasure-house for herself as a creation for the benefit of the mill workers), Justine allows him to nourish the illusion that women created in Bessy's mould are socially desirable. In short, she and her author fail to banish the spectre of traditional, debilitating ideal of the perfect 'lady' and her substandard engagement with the written word.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights Eliot's involvement in a formative period in Edith Wharton's writing career, in which Wharton was trying to reconcile her femininity with the gendered hierarchy laid out in contemporary gender-biased literary criticism. During this period, we have seen how Wharton attempted to navigate, or circumvent, the negative class associations of authorship and, most importantly, the limitations attributed to arguably the highest achieving

female writer in the English language, George Eliot – an author of ‘genius’ but ultimately ‘a delightfully feminine [...] writer.’¹⁹⁷ Unable to move beyond the essentialising debates taking place about female authorship at this time, Wharton could not reconcile her gender with her vocation and so could only move back and forth between the unsatisfactory female artistic identities with which she experimented in her fiction. The various models of female authorship provided by Eliot, both within her novels and as a figure in contemporary criticism, are taken up, revised and undercut by Wharton in her search for an acceptable artistic persona. Unable to accept an artistic identity which features ‘femininity,’ ultimately she aligns herself with the figure of the masculine scientist author.

The next chapter looks at the British writer Dorothy Richardson, a pioneer of literary Modernism whose representations of female readers in her series entitled *Pilgrimage* (1915-67) present the most robust challenge to the essentialist thinking that hindered Eliot, Woolson and Wharton. Though Richardson was reluctant to discuss Eliot, her presence can be felt throughout *Pilgrimage* in her autobiographical portrait of Miriam Henderson, whom she presents as the solution to Eliot’s search for her ideal female reader-author.

¹⁹⁷ [Henry James], ‘Review of *Felix Holt*’, pp. 207-8.

Chapter Five: Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957): Reclaiming the 'Feminine' Reader-Author

[I]t would be impossible to reach that state of peace and freedom that Thomas à Kempis meant [...] There were so many exquisite and wise things in the book; the language was beautiful. But somehow there was a whining going all through it... fretfulness. Anger too – 'I had rather feel compunction than know the definition thereof.' Why not both? He was talking at someone in that sentence. [...]

Why did men always have more freedom? [...] Adam had not faced the devil [...] Eve had not been unkind to the devil; only Adam and God. All the men in the world, and their God, ought to apologize to women...

— Dorothy Richardson, *Honeycomb*, *Pilgrimage*, Vol. I¹

In one of the strangest scenes of reading in the seminal thirteen-volume modernist series *Pilgrimage* (1915-1967), Dorothy Richardson presents her autobiographical heroine Miriam Henderson reading Thomas à Kempis's fifteenth-century devotional work *The Imitation of Christ* whilst lounging in the bath. In a novel replete with allusions to texts – particularly nineteenth-century scientific, philosophical, historical and fictional works – this instance is a peculiar choice by Richardson.

The source of reference is in *The Mill on the Floss*. In Eliot's novel, Maggie is inspired by *Imitation* to renounce all selfish desires for the sake of 'inward peace':

'I have often said unto thee, and now again I say the same, Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace... Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations, and superfluous cares fly away [...]

[...] Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets – here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things – here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard [...] this voice out of the far-off middle ages was the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message.²

The two scenes of reading in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Pilgrimage* make for an interesting contrast: whilst for Maggie there is a sense of identification with the writer, of mental

¹ Richardson, *Honeycomb* in *Pilgrimage*, Vol. I (London: Virago, 1979), pp. 458-9. All page numbers for *Pilgrimage* will be given in the text in parenthesis and will refer to the four-volume Virago collected edition. Each chapter-novel will henceforth be abbreviated as follows:

Volume I:

Pointed Roofs (1915) [PR]; *Backwater* (1916) [B]; *Honeycomb* (1917) [H]

Volume II:

The Tunnel (1919) [Tu]; *Interim* (1919) [I]

Volume III:

Deadlock (1921) [D]; *Revolving Lights* (1923) [RL]; *The Trap* (1925) [T]

Volume IV:

Oberland (1927) [O]; *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931) [DLH]; *Clear Horizon* (1935) [CH]; *Dimple Hill* (1938) [DH]; *March Moonlight* [unfinished] (1967) [MM]

² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, pp. 290-1.

surrender to the authority of this ‘supreme Teacher’ and his ideas, Richardson’s heroine remains detached, questioning the motives and emotions behind the text which she then links to ideas about gender and the patriarchal society in which she lives.

The insertion of a devotional text from Eliot’s work into *Pilgrimage* is repeated in Miriam Henderson’s reading of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie shows Mr. Riley a picture of the devil from Bunyan’s work and describes the eyes as ‘red, like fire, because he’s all fire inside, and it shines out at his eyes.’³ Again, the underlying theme is the relationship of a woman to textual and social authority. Maggie brings out this work in response to Mr. Riley’s request for her to show him a ‘prettier’ book than *The History of the Devil*, an instruction which Maggie’s immediate exhibition of an image of the devil in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* demonstrates she does not fully understand. In its counterpart scene in the first chapter-novel of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam contemplates the existence of hell, questioning the religious (particularly the scriptural) authorities that claim that it is real. Miriam alludes to the same illustration of the devil in Bunyan’s work, describing it in language which recalls Eliot’s: ‘a horror with expressionless eyes... darting out little spiky flames’ (*PR*, I, 170-1).

In *Pilgrimage*, these two scenes of Miriam’s reading are oblique allusions to *The Mill on the Floss*. For reasons which this chapter will examine, Richardson hesitantly indicates the impact Eliot has made on her own writing by borrowing two key texts as read by Eliot’s most readerly heroine, *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. These references indicate that Eliot’s significance for Richardson was tied up in questions of gender and literary authority, and Eliot’s attitudes towards them. Significantly, Richardson makes these obscure references to Eliot through literature written by men, and whereas Eliot’s heroine seems to accept their authority unquestioningly, Miriam questions it. Uncannily, these references suggest that Richardson’s relationship with Eliot was mediated by contemporary male commentators, a reading which my examination of *Pilgrimage* bears out.

Richardson borrows more than two scenes of reading from *The Mill on the Floss*. There are several nods to Maggie Tulliver in Richardson’s characterisation of Miriam Henderson, in fact, not least Maggie’s status as a reader and thwarted artist, and Miriam’s role as a reader and an author. The parallels between these characters revolve around their relationships with literature: recalling how in *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie’s narrative can be traced through her reading, *Pilgrimage* charts the development of the autobiographical

³ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 19.

heroine, Miriam Henderson, from a naïve girl to an independent-thinking ‘New Woman’ through the texts she reads. Dissatisfied with contemporary standards of education for women, both Maggie and Miriam attempt to compensate for this in their private reading. As young women, they are anxious to display their learning (see *Tu*, II, 103), though their intellectual nature marks them as outsiders. This is manifested physically, in Maggie’s unruly hair and dirty pinafore, and in Miriam’s ‘masculine’ hands and ill-fitting clothes (*B*, I, 283; *PR*, I, 123). In difficult times, both characters find escape in romance literature. This escape also takes a more physical form, with Maggie retreating into the attic space and Miriam withdrawing from London society to hide away in her room at the top of a boarding house.

As a pioneering twentieth-century modernist, we would expect that Richardson would set herself apart from Eliot, who was arguably *the* novelist of the nineteenth century, in her approach to authorship; but Richardson deliberately invokes Eliot in her writing and attempts (albeit hesitantly) to align herself with the author. Like Eliot, Richardson uses her fictional female reader to make a commentary about her authorship, and her identity as a writer; at the same time, the obliqueness of the allusions to *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that Richardson was ambivalent about Eliot as a literary role model.

If *The Mill on the Floss* is the work that underpins Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, the “urtext” upon which Richardson’s modern variation is based, the omission of any explicit mention of Eliot’s novels amongst Miriam’s reading is a puzzling one. *Pilgrimage* is a veritable catalogue of Miriam’s reading, which comprises, amongst a great many works, a long list of nineteenth-century British writers and contemporaries of Eliot, including Ouida, the Brontës, Rosa Nouchette Carey, Charlotte Yonge, Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, William Hurrell Mallock and Mary Augusta Ward. Richardson makes explicit references to Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), with Miriam comparing her experiences of teaching at a school in Hanover to Lucy Snowe’s time as a teacher in Brussels. She is presented reading the novel to the invalid Eleanor Dear in the closing chapter novels of *Pilgrimage* (*PR*, I, 55; *Tu*, II, 259-61; *D*, III, 65-6).⁴ The modernist hostility towards Victorian literature cannot, therefore, account for the omission of Eliot from Miriam’s reading, which appears to have been deliberate.

⁴ Critics have argued that *Pilgrimage* is a reworking of *Villette* and that Lucy Snowe is a ‘predecessor’ of Miriam Henderson. Anita Levy argues that this ‘actually distance[s] both character and novel’ from this nineteenth-century figure and her narrative, and so serves to highlight the contrast between Richardson’s modernist approach and Brontë’s Victorian novel. See Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*. 2nd edn (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), esp. pp. 28-9; Anita Levy, ‘Gendered Labor, the Woman Writer and Dorothy Richardson’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 25 (1991), 50-70, p. 64.

Richardson scholarship has rarely linked the author with George Eliot. Until relatively recently in fact, Dorothy Richardson has received little attention from modernist scholars. Whilst she was particularly well known in the 1930s and was recognised as a forerunner of female modernism and frequently grouped with the likes of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Marcel Proust in reviews of her work, by 1947, Ford Madox Ford described Richardson as ‘abominably unknown.’⁵ This is partly due to her reluctance to speak about herself. Richardson wrote essays on a range of subjects as disparate as dentistry and old age, politics and cinema; she also produced short stories and sketches. Yet she was reluctant to talk about herself and reportedly resented requests to provide biographical details.⁶ Her 1938 preface to *Pilgrimage*, for example, consists of a ‘reluctant and tight-lipped summation of her literary achievement’ and gives away very little about herself or the ways in which she conceived and developed her novel.⁷ Asked for a recent photograph of herself for an interview to be published in the *Little Review* in 1929, she sent a picture of herself as a baby.⁸ She left no diaries or notebooks, and much of her correspondence has been destroyed.⁹ Richardson died in poverty and obscurity in a south London nursing home in 1957, with one matron reporting that she suffered from the delusion that she was an author.¹⁰ Though she remained a recognised modernist pioneer after the second World War, she faded into the background of academic studies until the publication of Gloria Fromm’s biography in 1977, which marked the beginnings of a resurgence of interest in her.¹¹ As a result, where Eliot has been linked with a female modernist author, the immediate choice has generally been Virginia Woolf, who in contrast to Richardson became a cultural icon in the 1960s and was championed by academic feminists who wished to canonise Woolf as an opponent of patriarchal culture in

⁵ See Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 31.

⁶ See George H. Thomson, 'Dorothy Richardson: Letters to a Sister in America', *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)*, 43 (2000), 410-88, p. 416.

⁷ See George H. Thomson, 'Dorothy Richardson's Foreword to *Pilgrimage*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 42 (1996), 344-59, pp. 344-5.

⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*. trans. Victoria Appelbe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 1.

⁹ Much of Richardson’s correspondence with Veronica Grad and H. G. Wells has disappeared. Scott McCracken suggests that Rose Odle, Richardson’s sister in law, destroyed the letters in an effort to preserve Richardson’s reputation. See Scott McCracken, 'Editorial', *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008), 1-7, p. 3.

¹⁰ Jean Radford, *Dorothy Richardson* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 2.

¹¹ See McCracken, pp. 1-3.

the 1970s.¹² Consequently, of all female modernists, it is Woolf's relationship with Eliot that has been the most thoroughly documented.¹³

In spite of the focus on Woolf, I find Richardson's response to Eliot far more radical and experimental, and that Richardson's fiction offers the most apt solution to the dilemma of female authorship that Eliot articulates in her fiction. As this chapter will show, Eliot was a loaded, if problematic, figure for Richardson, and an important literary role model whose fiction provided the basis from which Richardson developed both her ideas about the function of literature, specifically its impact on the lives of women, and her sense of how a female or feminist artist should be defined. There is a significant overlap between Eliot's realist aesthetic and Richardson's modernism, both of which were created as a way of representing reality in a new, more accurate and socially productive way, with an emphasis on female experience and female psychology. I will be examining Eliot's realist aesthetic as a basis for Richardson's modernism, viewing each approach as a feminist corrective to the gender-biased values of Victorian realism. In doing so, I will be clarifying the reasons why Richardson found it difficult to classify Eliot as a realist – and, in fact, to classify Eliot at all in terms of gender. I will also be looking at how Richardson implements Eliot's scale of social female empowerment, ranging from the socially-disempowered passive reader to the independent, active reader-author, through her fictional representations of reading in *Pilgrimage*. Richardson concretises the links between female reading and female authorship through Miriam Henderson, both within the narrative world of *Pilgrimage* and, given that the character is autobiographical, through the act of writing the novel itself. Richardson's success in conceiving of an ideal female reader-author – that is, one who is both socially integrated and capable of producing intellectual literary art – is dependent on her modernist approach and the consequent fluidity of gendered terms in *Pilgrimage*. These terms are destabilised over the course of the novel, and by the end, Richardson's description of Miriam as a

¹² See Tammy Clewell, 'The Making of a New Virginia Woolf Icon', *College Literature*, 32 (2005), 172-81, pp. 172-3.

¹³ The list of notable studies focussing on George Eliot and Virginia Woolf include: Gillian Beer, 'Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf', in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Barnes & Noble, 1979); Alison Booth, 'Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Women of Letters: The Example of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf', in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991); Alison Booth, 'Incomplete Stories: Womanhood and Artistic Ambition in *Daniel Deronda* and *Between the Acts*', in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Tony E. Jackson, *The Subject of Modernism: Narrative Alterations in the Fiction of Eliot, Conrad, Woolf, and Joyce* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, The Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

'feminine' reader-author indicates that she is beyond the limiting patriarchal structures of gender which remained prevalent in twentieth-century literary criticism and scientific thought. Unlike any other work of modernist fiction in the early twentieth century, Richardson's *Pilgrimage* presents an outright rejection of the essentialising ideas about gender that thwarted Eliot in her search for a viable artistic identity, and a radical feminist revision of women's relationship with the written word, and even with language. Richardson's *Pilgrimage* therefore provides a fitting close to this study.

Part of the reason why the relationship between Richardson and Eliot has been neglected by modernist scholarship lies in Richardson's reluctance to speak about Eliot. Her fiction, essays and letters are filled with instances where Richardson seems to deliberately overlook Eliot. Richardson is frustratingly reticent when it comes to her literary foremother, and it requires some digging to piece her references to Eliot into a coherent narrative. We will look at these omissions and the brief allusions that Richardson makes to the writer, and from these we will begin to build up a picture of what Eliot represented for Richardson as a female modernist, and to understand why Richardson was torn between distancing her authorship from that of her Victorian predecessor and aligning herself with Eliot and her fiction.

Gendering George Eliot

To understand Eliot's significance for Richardson requires that we first identify Eliot's position in early twentieth-century literary criticism. Whilst the relationship between modernists and Victorian writers has traditionally been seen as one of opposition and even hostility,¹⁴ this claim is complicated by the debate about female authorship that was still taking place in literary criticism at that time, nowhere more controversially than with the example of George Eliot. That Richardson never defended Eliot against misogynistic literary criticism is one of several telling omissions surrounding the author and her fiction. If we look at how Eliot was being received from the time when Richardson began publishing fiction (the first volume of *Pilgrimage*, entitled *Pointed Roofs*, came out in 1915), we see that Eliot remained a contentious figure in the debate about what constituted good literature, and how the relationship between gender and authorship should be defined.

Eliot's reputation in literary circles had seen little improvement since John Cross's presentation of the author in his biography (1885) as a staunch moralist. The modern reader,

¹⁴ See David Daiches, *The Novel and the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 5; Carol Watts, *Dorothy Richardson* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1995), p. 3; Tim Dolin, *George Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 216-7.

who valued aesthetics over morality, was typically put off by her ‘pedantry’ and ‘strenuous solemnity.’¹⁵ Edmund Gosse, who famously articulated the Oedipal struggle between Victorian realism and early twentieth-century modernism in his fictitious account of his relationship with his father, a fundamentalist whose theories the young Edmund grew to reject,¹⁶ summed up the general mood in 1922, sneering at the ‘priggish idolatry’ of Eliot and declaring ‘we are sheep that look up to George Eliot and are not fed by her ponderous moral aphorisms and didactic ethical influence.’¹⁷ Issues of aesthetics overlapped with prejudice against female authors in literary criticism, in particular with the repeated complaint that Eliot’s intellect impacted negatively on her fiction. Edmund Gosse went on to state that Eliot’s literary genius was marred ‘when she turned from passive acts of memory to a strenuous exercise of intellect,’ to ‘the scientific novel’ which was weighed down by the intellect of its author.¹⁸ More explicit nods to nineteenth-century ideas about gender and authorship saw Eliot as an author de-sexed by her intellect: following on from the young Henry James’s misogynistic report of Eliot as a ‘magnificently ugly – deliciously hideous’ ‘horse-faced bluestocking’ in 1869, Eliot was described in early twentieth-century British criticism as an ‘ugl[y],’ ‘dowd[y],’ ‘large, thick-set sybil,’ ‘George Sand *plus* Science and *minus* Sex.’¹⁹ The violence of these attacks on Eliot highlights how contentious a figure she remained within the literary sphere, and also the virulent misogyny that persisted in literary criticism.

A number of female authors recognised the misogyny of these claims and their implications for female authors, and so jumped to Eliot’s defence. Virginia Woolf dryly noted the preoccupation of male literary critics with Eliot’s ‘lack of charm,’ ‘a quality which is held to be supremely desirable in women.’ ‘George Eliot was not charming,’ she continued, ‘she was not strongly feminine; she had none of those eccentricities and inequalities of temper which give to so many artists the endearing simplicity of children.’²⁰ In her essay on Eliot, first published in 1919, she dubbed *Middlemarch* ‘one of the few English novels written for grown-up people’ and lauded Eliot as a ‘great,’ ‘dar[ing]’ and ‘ambitio[us]’

¹⁵ See David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 40; see also Edmund Gosse, ‘George Eliot’, in *Aspects and Impressions* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1928), p. 26.

¹⁶ Gosse’s memoir, *Father and Son* (1907), is subtitled ‘A Study of Two Temperaments.’

¹⁷ Gosse, pp. 13, 27.

¹⁸ Gosse, pp. 15, 19.

¹⁹ Letter to Henry James Sr., May 10 [1869], in Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Letters*. Vol. I 1843-1875 (London: Macmillan, 1974); Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical Overview* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 222; David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), p. 283; Gosse, p. 11; Henley, p. 162.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, ‘George Eliot’, in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1925), p. 207.

woman struggling in spite of the obstacles presented by her gender, and emerging '[t]riumphant.'²¹ Katherine Mansfield objected to an uncomplimentary review of Eliot's fiction by Sidney Waterlow in terms of sexual polemic: 'She *was* big, even though she was 'heavy' too [...] Oh, I think [Waterlow] ought really to have been more generous [...] I feel I must stand up for my SEX.'²²

That Richardson was not among the authors who defended Eliot is unexpected. As we see in essays like 'Women in the Arts' (1925), Richardson had no qualms about stating that female artistry had been hampered throughout history by men,²³ yet she was remarkably reticent about discussing Eliot. The author does not appear in any of Richardson's essays and is alluded to only in passing in her fiction and what remains of her correspondence. Whilst Richardson's references to books tend towards contemporary fiction, compare this paucity of references to Eliot to Richardson's celebration of Jane Austen's fiction in her essay 'Novels' (1948) and her accounts of reading the Brontës, Jane Austen, Sarah Grand and Susan Warner (as well as a long list of nineteenth-century male authors including Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, Henry James and Gustave Flaubert) in her letters.²⁴

The references Richardson does make to Eliot – five in total – demonstrate that she was knowledgeable about the author's life and well-versed in her fiction. Before I examine these references in further detail, it is useful to look at them as a group because this highlights the degree to which Eliot's significance for Richardson was tied up in ideas about gender and literature. This also highlights how Richardson re-evaluated her relationship with Eliot over the course of her writing career, and suggests that the author and her fiction presented competing ideas in Richardson's mind. Briefly, the references are as follows: in 1920, she accuses Eliot and other 'lady writers,' of 'a certain snobbishness' and 'ladylike prejudice' in

²¹ Woolf, pp. 213, 216, 218.

²² Letter from Mansfield to J. M. Murry, [Nov. 25 1919], in Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. Vol. III: 1919-1920 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 118.

²³ 'In the old days,' she writes, 'not only was art not demanded of women, but the smallest sign of genuine ability in a female would put a man in the state of mind of the lady who said when she saw the giraffe: "I don't believe it."' Dorothy Richardson, 'Women in the Arts', *Vanity Fair*, 24 (May 1925), 47; 100, p. 47.

²⁴ Of Jane Austen, Richardson writes: 'Encountering *Northanger Abbey* – Jane Austen's sly dig at the contemporary thriller – this impassioned defence of the novel, one is moved to wonder whether, could she come among us to-day, she might presently be found defending its characteristic function, the detective novel, and might substitute in the case of a reader discovered immersed in a Sayers or an Innes, for 'a volume of the *Spectator*', a novel by Proust, Joyce, or Virginia Woolf?' Dorothy Richardson, 'Novels', *Life and Letters*, 56 (March 1948), 188-92, pp. 188-9. For references to nineteenth-century women writers in Richardson's correspondence, see letters to Alan Odle, Sept. 12 1916, to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, Dec. 5 1916, and to Winifred Bryher, [Oct. 1934], in Gloria G. Fromm, ed., *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 12, 43, 272; Thomson, 'Dorothy Richardson: Letters to a Sister in America', p. 415.

their literature;²⁵ in 1931, she states in *Dawn's Left Hand* that Eliot '[w]rites like a man' (IV, 240); in 1940, she praises two essays about Eliot and her fiction written by Muriel Agnes Masefield which celebrate her as a feminist (in our modern understanding of the word);²⁶ in 1948, she writes that she does not believe Eliot's writing to be either masculine or feminine;²⁷ and in 1949, she alludes to Eliot's piousness and disagrees with the conflation of morality and Christianity which, as we see in *Revolving Lights* (1923), Richardson viewed as a fundamentally patriarchal institution, 'a standing insult to [women's] very existence' (*RL*, III, 329).²⁸ At various points in her career then, Richardson was asking herself whether Eliot was a feminist, or 'feminine' writer, or a patriarchal, 'masculine' realist.

The sweeping accusation of a 'ladylike prejudice' made against Eliot and other female writers in 1920²⁹ can be seen in the context of the suppression of an instalment of Richardson's fifth chapter-novel *Interim* by the *Little Review* in which it was being serialised. The *Little Review* was a cutting-edge periodical which specialised in the publication of experimental fiction and made the provocative claim that it would make 'no compromise with the public taste.'³⁰ Lady Desborough reproved Richardson for her description of goings-on in the dental surgery where Miriam works in *Interim*, which were 'almost *too* nasty' for a female author: she would be 'quite ready to face' such details if they were inevitable, as in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, but she did not feel, in Richardson's case, that the gory details 'led from or on to anything.'³¹ The women writers Richardson refers to in her letter apparently took a more ladylike approach to their writing and omitted such offending details. This is particularly true of Eliot, who famously cohabited with a married man but generally presented paragons of womanly virtue in her fiction.³² In this way, she and other novelists were, to Richardson's mind, producing patriarchal, or 'masculine' realism which presented a false image of women in fiction which real women then felt pressured to emulate (this will be discussed in more

²⁵ Letter to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, May 3 1920, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 43.

²⁶ Letter to Miss Plater, Mar. 11 1940, in the *Dorothy M. Richardson Collection*, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

²⁷ Letter from Richardson to Bryher, Aug. 6 1948, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 587.

²⁸ Letter from Richardson to Eleanor Phillips, Jan. 25 1949, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 599.

²⁹ The full quotation reads: 'The only connection I feel between V. Woolf & Jane Austen (& nearly all the lady writers, Eliot, Hobbes, Ward, Cholmondely [*sic*], all I think except Charlotte, is a certain snobbishness. Almost inevitable in Jane & detracting nothing from her supreme achievement. Viola Meynell I forgot. She is entirely free from ladylike prejudices.' See letter from Richardson to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, May 3 1920, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 43.

³⁰ See Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 'General Introduction', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 14-5.

³¹ See Gloria G. Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 118.

³² This discrepancy has been noted by feminist scholars. See esp. Austen, p. 549, and Millett, p. 139.

detail later). To be attacked for rectifying this, particularly from another woman, evidently irked Richardson.

Eliot may not, in Richardson's view, have been brave enough to represent the details of her cohabitation with a married man in the pages of her novels, but Richardson evidently recognised her value as a literary model in the ongoing debate about female authorship. She was presented with an opportunity to comment on this debate when writing *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931), a chapter-novel which explores Richardson's relationship with the writer H. G. Wells whom Richardson met in 1896 and with whom she embarked on a brief affair in 1906, the year the events of the narrative are set.³³ The portrait of Wells is highly critical, particularly when it comes to his attitudes towards women and female authorship. The latter is succinctly illustrated in a brief interchange where Hypo, the Wells figure, suggests Miriam should become a novelist like George Eliot:

'Perhaps the novel's not your form. Women ought to be good novelists. But they write best about their own experiences. Love-affairs and so forth. They lack creative imagination [...] Try a novel of ideas. Philosophical. There's George Eliot.'

'Writes like a man.'

'Just so. Lewes. Be a feminine George Eliot.'

(*DLH*, IV, 239-40)

This assertion, that Eliot '[w]rites like a man,' is the only comment Miriam Henderson makes about Eliot throughout *Pilgrimage*, and has traditionally been taken at face value by Richardson's critics. Deborah Parsons, for example, writes that 'Miriam Henderson dismisses Eliot' on the basis of this exchange.³⁴ However, it is clear from Miriam's reaction to the assertions Hypo makes about the capabilities of female novelists that she is not being sincere; rather she is humouring him. In the following paragraph, she humorously notes how he presents her with an array of male novelists' amongst whom Hypo includes George Eliot, 'with the air of a demonstrator intent on directing a blank and wavering feminine consciousness.' Miriam imagines a female friend, Amabel, laughing at the exchange that has just taken place 'till her eyes were filled with tears' (240). Hypo's attempt to account for Eliot's style through the influence of George Henry Lewes (a common assertion made in misogynistic literary criticism) is, according to Richardson, simply laughable – as is the implicit, and equally common idea that Eliot's supposed masculinity made her less of a

³³ Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, pp. 257-8.

³⁴ Parsons, p. 28.

writer, a fault which Miriam should apparently try to rectify in her own 'feminine' authorship.

At the same time, however, Richardson does not have Miriam rush to Eliot's defence in this excerpt: she indicates that Hypo's assessment of Eliot, herself and women authors on the whole, is ridiculous, but at no point in this scene does she celebrate Eliot's writing or dub her a feminine or feminist author, even in her private thoughts. She states what Eliot is not, but not what she is. Another interesting and related point that this exchange raises is the fact that Miriam is presented as being familiar with Eliot's fiction, but not once in *Pilgrimage* is she presented reading her novels; a significant omission given that, as we have seen, the novel is a veritable catalogue of Miriam's reading which includes numerous nineteenth-century authors. Both of these silences indicate that Richardson was ambivalent about Eliot; unable to form a coherent theory about whether she was a masculine or feminine author in her own mind, perhaps she felt unable to comment.

The most positive reference Richardson makes to Eliot comes indirectly in her response to a collection of essays on women writers by Muriel Agnes Masefield, sent to her by a friend in 1940: 'I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book,' she writes. 'Granted the way of approach, the essays, I think, most of them, could hardly be bettered. One or two, particularly that on George Eliot, are masterpieces in their kind.'³⁵ Richardson's approval is of interest given that Masefield celebrates Eliot as a feminist writer.

Masefield's ideas about Eliot in the two essays she writes about her are twofold. On the one hand, she echoes her contemporaries in her presentation of Eliot as a severe, socially awkward woman whose literature was didactic and 'overlaboured.'³⁶ On the other hand, Masefield is anxious to impress upon her readers the feminist streak in Eliot's writing. In discussing Eliot's life, she describes how 'she chafed and longed to *do something*. She was voicing this girlhood's pain when she wrote in *Daniel Deronda* – 'You may try, but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and to suffer the slavery of being a girl.'³⁷ And later: 'George Eliot had splendidly surmounted 'the slavery of being a girl,' which Marian Evans had felt such a check upon the 'man's force of genius' within her.'³⁸ From Richardson's comments, we can presume that in spite of the problems she identified in Eliot's fiction, she, like Masefield, saw her as a writer of genius, and an author

³⁵Letter to Miss Plater, Mar. 11 1940, in the *Dorothy M. Richardson Collection*, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

³⁶Muriel Masefield, 'Life of George Eliot', in *Women Novelists From Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934), pp. 209-10; Masefield, 'George Eliot's Novels', p. 214.

³⁷Masefield, 'Life of George Eliot', p. 204.

³⁸Masefield, 'Life of George Eliot', p. 211.

who used her fiction to make a feminist commentary on the status of the female author. It is likely Richardson would also have agreed with Masefield that *The Mill on the Floss* was Eliot's 'masterpiece'.³⁹

The timing of this letter is significant. After the publication of the penultimate chapter-novel *Dimple Hill* (1938), work on *Pilgrimage* had stalled, and it was in early March of 1940, the time Richardson wrote this letter having read Masefield's essays on Eliot, that she returned to her novel, pulling together the 'scraps' that she had 'wrested from [herself] during the past year' for what would become the final, unfinished volume of the series, *March Moonlight* (1967).⁴⁰ One wonders if this exploration of Eliot's achievement as a feminist writer fuelled Richardson's desire to return to her reworking of *The Mill on the Floss*.

In 1948, now a widow, Richardson spent the summer reading Jane Austen and the Brontës, and interestingly her reading brought her back to George Eliot. In a letter to Winifred Bryher, she wrote:

[I]n my reading just now, I find myself moving from the Brontës to Jane Austen & back again [...] Something in both these so different creatures there is, in the B's definite depth of experience, that is totally lacking in the masterpieces of masculine fiction. George Eliot seems to stand between the two camps, belonging wholly to neither.⁴¹

That Eliot is neither a 'masculine' nor a 'feminine' writer in this account is not entirely complimentary, not entirely a criticism – a masculine work may still qualify, in Richardson's opinion, as a 'masterpiece.' Nonetheless, there is a sense of regret that Richardson cannot hold up George Eliot as a feminine author. The sudden, unexpected mention of Eliot in this context is striking, indicating that where writing and gender are concerned, Eliot continues to resist categorisation for Richardson.

The final reference to Eliot's piousness and her supposed conflation of Christianity with morality in 1949 is the least revealing reference Richardson makes to the author,⁴² but it is nonetheless significant in that it shows that Richardson was very much a typical modernist in her rejection of Christianity, and that she continued to identify herself in opposition to Eliot on the point of morality at least, right until the end of her career.

³⁹ Masefield, 'George Eliot's Novels', in *Women Novelists*, p. 217.

⁴⁰ Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, p. 328.

⁴¹ Letter from Richardson to Bryher, Aug. 6 1948, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 587.

⁴² Letter from Richardson to Eleanor Phillips, Jan. 25 1949, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 599.

An examination of the references Richardson makes to Eliot indicates the difficulty Richardson experienced in defining Eliot as either a feminist or patriarchal author. What these references do not tell us is precisely why Eliot resisted these labels for Richardson, and why she felt so strongly about Eliot's fiction that she spent the majority of her writing career reworking *The Mill on the Floss* and with it, Eliot's ideas about reading and authorship. We begin to understand the reasons behind Richardson's ambivalence when we examine Richardson's modernist aesthetic alongside Eliot's realism.

Eliot's Realist Aesthetic Made Modern

Typical of a female modernist, Richardson objected to realism on a feminist basis, describing it as a mode of authorship which presented women according to patriarchal thinking under the guise of objective reality. For the realist novel to supply the conventional 'beginning, middle, climax, and curtain,' it had to be selective and 'ignore' material that did not fit in its scheme. It was 'restrict[ed]' by the author's 'self-imposed task of searching for superficial sequences.'⁴³ Far from providing a 'mirror' to reality,⁴⁴ realism imposed meaning upon it, distorting reality and misleading the reader, and was therefore more a reflection of the ideas of the author than an expression of objective truth. For Richardson, the central problem with realism was that it was 'too much set upon exploiting the sex-motif as, hitherto, seen & depicted by men.'⁴⁵ If, as Richardson's contemporaries were arguing at this time, social ideas about women were discursively formed, then the dominance of realism in the early twentieth century was damaging to women's social position.⁴⁶

Let us look briefly at the problems Richardson would have identified with Eliot's realist aesthetic. Famous for its authorial interventions and open attempts to influence the reader, immediately we can see why Richardson might have objected to Eliot's approach. In Chapter Two, we examined how Eliot selected 'commonplace' mortals as her artistic subjects in order to encourage the reader to see their inner, moral beauty. Eliot frequently remarks on certain passages to guide the reader as to how they should view what they have just read, and she even interrupts the narrative in *Adam Bede* (1859) to make her intentions explicit in this respect. Her argument that artists are morally obliged to produce realist art tells us how we are meant to understand her fiction, and what we should take away from it. Whilst in practice,

⁴³See Richardson, 'Novels', p. 191; Dorothy Richardson, 'Adventures for Readers', *Life and Letters To-Day*, 22 (1939), 45-52, p. 51.

⁴⁴Dorothy Richardson, 'Foreword', in *Pilgrimage, Vol. I* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 9.

⁴⁵Letter to Henry Savage, Jan. 6 1950, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 629.

⁴⁶ See Jane Goldman, 'Virginia Woolf and Modernist Aesthetics', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 40-44.

Eliot does not strictly adhere to her project of evoking the ‘commonplace’ experiences of ordinary people, she explicitly presents the world in a way that seeks to alter the viewpoint of her readers by encouraging them to identify and thereby empathise with others.

Surprisingly, however, at no point in her writing does Richardson identify George Eliot as a realist. This is particularly noteworthy in the brief overview of literary history she provides in her ‘Foreword’ to *Pilgrimage*, which cites Balzac and Arnold Bennett as the forerunners of literary realism, then skips to 1911.⁴⁷

If we consider Eliot as a pioneer of psychological realism, specifically of female psychological realism, we can see why Richardson could not dismiss Eliot as a realist. Eliot’s realism shares Richardson’s aim of providing a ‘feminine equivalent,’ or feminist corrective, to the ‘masculine’ nineteenth-century realism that Richardson and her contemporaries found so objectionable.⁴⁸ Eliot’s fiction has received a great deal of critical attention for its interest in female dilemmas, perspectives and psychology. Eliot emphasises the significance of the lives of ordinary women (like the old woman scraping carrots), advocating, as I argued in Chapter Two, equality amongst all subjects, including male and female characters. In the same vein, Richardson’s fiction argues that a woman’s day-to-day life and her psychology, both traditionally dismissed as uninteresting by literary critics,⁴⁹ and also dismissed within the growing academic study of English literature and the male-dominated literary canon it was establishing, is a fitting subject for literature. Richardson explicitly argued that her aesthetic was a necessary corrective to realist fiction which she saw as perpetuating the myth that male experience was more relevant and interesting to the average reader. Both women writers objected to a literary outlook which subordinated feminine detail.⁵⁰ Just as Eliot insists on the importance of Dorothea’s ‘unhistoric acts,’ so Richardson emphasises the importance of Miriam’s everyday life in art, and by extension, its social significance.⁵¹ Like the nineteenth-century novel that *Middlemarch* exemplifies, *Pilgrimage* is characterised by its almost encyclopaedic depiction of the minutiae of everyday life. If realism was ignoring quotidian female experience and psychology, Richardson goes to the other extreme by refusing to document anything *but* quotidian female experience and psychology and redresses the balance.

⁴⁷ See Richardson, ‘Foreword’, p. 9; Parsons, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Richardson, ‘Foreword’, p. 9.

⁴⁹ In an overview of the English novel, for example, after reading *Pilgrimage* Walter Allen was ‘left wondering what is the significance of it all, what has it all amounted to.’ Allen, p. 367.

⁵⁰ See Booth, *Greatness Engendered*, p. 113-4.

⁵¹ Olson makes this argument with regard to Woolf’s fiction, but it works equally well with Richardson’s. See Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 22.

Seen from this perspective, Eliot's realist aesthetic may be viewed as a template for Richardson's modernist project. Richardson takes Eliot's focus on female experience and psychology to its absolute limit in *Pilgrimage*. She does this firstly in terms of quantity, dedicating a mammoth thirteen volumes to the experiences and thinking of her autobiographical female character in *Pilgrimage*, a length rivalled only by Marcel Proust's seven-volume novel *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-1927). Secondly, she ensures the free flow of her protagonist's thoughts by refusing either to deviate from Miriam's perspective or to experiment with styles or structures that would require Miriam's thoughts to be edited or cut down in any way. Take in contrast to this, for example, the diversity of styles and voices adopted in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), or the cyclical structure of Woolf's most experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), in which the narrative is told from the point of view of six different characters. Moreover, by writing in her pioneering 'feminine' style, dubbed 'stream of consciousness' writing by May Sinclair in 1918 and the 'psychological sentence of the feminine gender' by Virginia Woolf in 1923,⁵² Richardson claimed her prose was not obstructed by the 'masculine' literary conventions of syntax: 'Feminine prose,' she wrote, 'should properly be unpunctuated, moving from point to point without formal obstructions' as conventionally imposed by the author,⁵³ allowing her heroine's thought processes to be presented freely on the page, motivated by free association. This style of writing came to be associated with Woolf and Joyce, who adapted the technique for their own works.

'[W]riting *through* the consciousness of her heroine Miriam,' Richardson denies herself – and the reader – 'access to any position outside that of her narrating subject,'⁵⁴ and yet, by producing a narrative series in which a woman's consciousness is the centre, she is able to insist on the importance of female perspective without having to doctor her narrative to convey this message as Eliot and Richardson's contemporaries were doing. Paradoxically, by openly providing a narrative which is wholly subjective, Richardson created what she deemed a form of unadulterated reality, or hyper reality, surrounding female experience, just as Eliot was trying to create a more accurate reflection of society and its women through her realism.

⁵² May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', *Little Review*, 5 (Apr. 1918), 3-11, p. 6; Virginia Woolf, 'Romance and the Heart', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 367.

⁵³ Richardson, 'Foreword', p. 12.

⁵⁴ Michele Barrett and Jean Radford, 'Modernism in the 1930s: Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf', in *1936: The Sociology of Literature. Volume 1 - The Politics of Modernism*, ed. Francis Barker, et al. (Colchester: University of Essex, 1979), pp. 266-7.

As critics have suggested, Richardson's writing style compels the reader to take on Miriam's consciousness in a way that had never been attempted before in literature.⁵⁵ The idea of taking on another person's consciousness can be traced back to Eliot's realist aesthetic, which presents identification with characters in literature as the route towards empathy; in Richardson's aesthetic, this device is less a moral requirement and more a way of insisting on the importance of female perspective without resorting to 'untruthful' intrusion.

Another significant way in which Richardson reworks Eliot's ideas about the social function of her literature for women is in her efforts to make the reader an active participant in the text. 'Readers,' Richardson lamented, '[a]lways regard themselves as recipients, never as donors,' but 'while subject to the influence of a work of art, we are ourselves artists, supplying creative collaboration.'⁵⁶ Whereas Eliot's fiction encourages active collaboration with the text for the most part by example – a technique which, as we will see shortly, Richardson also adopts through her portrayal of Miriam Henderson – *Pilgrimage* compels the reader to engage actively with the text through its complex style.

On several levels then, *Pilgrimage* works to challenge its readers' ideas about what reading should constitute, and how involved they should be in the process. The reader is compelled, for example, to contribute to their reading of the novel through Richardson's refusal to supply a viewpoint outside that of her protagonist. As May Sinclair wrote, Richardson's narrative avoids 'interfere[nce],' 'analys[is],' and 'expla[nation].' She does not 'tell a story or handle a situation or set a scene.' She 'avoid[s] drama as she avoids narration.' Her style requires that '[s]he must not be the wise, all-knowing author. She must be Miriam Henderson. She must not know or divine anything that Miriam does not know or divine; she must not see anything that Miriam does not see.'⁵⁷ Contextual information such as setting, who is speaking, the nature of Miriam's relationships with the characters she encounters and events which precede or motivate certain scenes are not narrated directly.⁵⁸ The most notable examples of this are Mrs. Henderson's suicide at the end of *Honeycomb* and Miriam's nervous breakdown which precedes her trip to Switzerland in *Oberland*. Such information

⁵⁵ John Rosenberg, *Dorothy Richardson: The Genius They Forgot* (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 53; Leon Edel, 'Dorothy Richardson, 1882-1957', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 4 (1958), 165-8, p. 165.

⁵⁶ See Dorothy Richardson, 'Authors and Readers' in *Dorothy Richardson Collection*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Dorothy Richardson in Geoffrey West, 'The Artist and the World Today', *The Bookman*, 86 (May 1934), 92-96, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Sinclair, p. 5.

⁵⁸ As Richardson stated in 1923, '[i]nformation there must be, but the moment it's given directly as information the sense of immediate experience is gone.' Letter to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, Apr. 30 1923, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 68.

must be supplied by the reader, who is left to create a coherent narrative through a process of deduction and cross reference.⁵⁹

Not only are readers faced with a novel without a clear plot, in which key events are often alluded to obliquely, but the writing is comprised largely of long stretches of unparagraphed text which flout the laws of punctuation and syntax. The writing switches between past and present tense, between first and third person narration, full stops are left out, sentences are left unfinished, and dialogue is set within the flow of Miriam's thought rather than on separate lines of text so that the reader is forced to concentrate to work out who is speaking.⁶⁰

Having examined the formal parallels between Eliot's and Richardson's fiction, the discussion now turns to the narrative world of *Pilgrimage* and its representations of women reading. It asks how Richardson's ideas about the relationship between the author, the reader and the text as set out in her modernist aesthetic shapes her revision of Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in her portrayal of Miriam Henderson in *Pilgrimage*.

Constructing the Active Reader in Pilgrimage

Miriam Henderson's transition from a naïve girl to an independent thinking 'New Woman' and author is dependent on her questioning and ultimately dismissing the authority of the vast majority of realist discourse as 'lies' about women 'from beginning to end' (*RL*, III, 322), and developing her own distinctly 'feminine' voice as a literary artist. As we have seen in previous chapters, the meta-narrative technique of presenting a character reading and constantly evaluating her own responses to literature prompts the actual reader to apply similar questions to their own reading practices, thereby making their engagement with literature something they do more self-consciously.⁶¹ Miriam is used by Richardson not only to demonstrate the impact of active reading practices by example, but also to elucidate the reasoning behind this kind of engagement with texts. With privileged access to her thinking, the reader follows Miriam as she develops her ideas about female literary engagement, and observes how her own reading has shaped her identity.

Many of Miriam's reading encounters may be read as a foil to those of her counterpart in *The Mill on the Floss*, a young woman who is ultimately defined and destroyed by her

⁵⁹ See Parsons, pp. 30-1; see also Radford, pp. 7-8, 11, 86-7; Gillian E. Hanscombe, *The Art of Life: Dorothy Richardson and the Development of Feminist Consciousness* (London: Peter Owen, 1982), pp. 45, 51.

⁶⁰ See Parsons, p. 33.

⁶¹ Cheryl A. Wilson, 'The Victorian Woman Reader in May Sinclair's *Mary Olivier*: Self-Stimulation, Intellectual Freedom, and Escape', *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)*, 46 (2003), 365-81, p. 365.

reading. In her time as a teacher at the two schools, Miriam undergoes an intensive period of reading, specifically of romantic and sensation works, which recalls Maggie's indulgence in romantic fiction in *The Mill on the Floss*.⁶² Miriam uses these texts as 'a staging ground for rehearsing future selves': through her reading we see her experimenting with a range of models of female behaviour and identity presented in these works.⁶³ She fantasises about leading the lives of the heroines in Mrs. Hungerford novels, imagining herself escaping the school to marry:

There were the things she wanted; gay house-parties, people with beautiful wavering complexions and masses of shimmering hair catching the light, fragrant filmy diaphanous dresses; there were the people to whom she belonged – a year or two of life like that, dancing and singing in and out of the house and gardens; and then marriage [...] That is what is meant by happiness. (B, I, 285)

However, within the same paragraph Miriam recognises that this model is not an adequate reflection of who she is or who she aspires to be. This recalls Maggie Tulliver's recognition in *The Mill on the Floss* that the romances she reads, which make her 'in love with [the] world,' present a distorted reflection of reality.⁶⁴ Miriam acknowledges that the ideals she reads about 'could only happen to people with money' or a governess heroine from one of Mrs. Hungerford's novels; and the fair-haired, large-handed, bespectacled Miriam does not fit the mould of the typical Hungerford governesses, who have 'clouds of hair' and are 'pathetically slender and appealing in their deep mourning' (B, I, 285). Miriam's intellect and complexity also run at odds with the 'depths of domesticity' in her reading: if she were cast in a Rosa Nouchette Carey novel, she thinks, she would not be a heroine but 'some sort of bad unsimple woman' who is 'turned out of the happy homes.' We recall that Maggie, identifying with the 'dark' heroines of her reading, determines to 'to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness.'⁶⁵ Miriam feels herself 'mock[ed]' by the women who have 'never had to face real horrors' in 'happy books' by writers like Louisa May Alcott. These books are 'mocking' in Miriam's eyes because they present damaging, simplistic ideas about women in the guise of harmless, 'happy' novels (B, I, 284, 285, 303).

Increasingly, the frustrated Miriam is presented reading against the grain of the text, and reading what is deemed unsuitable material, rebelling against the social values designed to be unthinkingly absorbed in a more conventional, passive mode of reading. As well as

⁶² See Labovitz, p. 29.

⁶³ Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition', p. 78.

⁶⁴ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 306.

⁶⁵ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 332.

identifying with the wrong female characters in books, she seeks defiant heroines in sensational, 'evil' novels by Ouida, namely *Under Two Flags* (1867), *Moths* (1880) and *In Maremma* (1882), dramatic novels of scandal, intrigue and violence revolving round defiant women in exotic settings. Miriam desires the 'bad things – strong bad things' that happen in the novels to happen to her, not 'car[ing] what people think or say' (*B*, I, 281, 286). She reads long into the night, knowing it will impair her teaching during the day. 'Almost every night,' Richardson writes, '[Miriam] read until two o'clock [...] in a 'vicious circle' of self-indulgence. It was a sin.' 'She ceased to read her Bible and to pray' (*B*, I, 282, 286).

Here, Richardson is alluding to the Victorian stereotype of the romance reader, whose narcissistic fantasies are fuelled by her reading at the expense of her fulfilling her proper social and moral role in the home. The aim is to highlight that this stereotype has been used to control women's conception of themselves and their behaviour. We remember that in the third volume of *The Mill on the Floss*, this is a stereotype that Maggie Tulliver comes to fulfil through her thwarted attempt to elope with her cousin's fiancé, and symbolically in the flood which kills Maggie and her brother and wreaks physical havoc on the community. This is a myth which Richardson is anxious to dispel in her novel: in *Pilgrimage*, if Miriam 'slid[es] idly into [...] vicarious life' (*D*, III, 199-200), Richardson emphasises that this is an empowering move.

Whether by identification with or rejection of literary models of femininity, Miriam's reading allows her to discover herself. As she reads, 'she rediscover[s] the self she had known at home [...] erecting a little wall of unapproachability between herself and her family [...] it was herself, the nearest, most intimate self she had known' (*B*, I, 282). Whereas in company, Miriam is ashamed of her 'masculine' hands – '[w]ith others they oppressed her by their size and their lack of feminine expressiveness. No one could fall in love with such hands' – it is 'only [in those] intervals of quiet reading that she c[omes] into possession of [them].' Private, active reading allows her a safe space in which to come to terms with and accept herself as she is: 'I don't care what people think or say,' she says, 'I am myself' (*B*, I, 283, 286). Just as Maggie Tulliver claims the attic as her place of escape in which to read, in later volumes Miriam lives alone at the top of a boarding house, and is presented reading in isolation, and being absorbed into the world of fiction, 'forgetting everything' about being a woman that she has been taught at school during her time as a teacher and by her society as a whole (*I*, II, 383).

The distinction between Eliot's and Richardson's approaches to romance reading – corruption and destruction versus the social empowerment of the female reader-artist

respectively – can be traced back to their psychological models of the reading process. Like Eliot, Richardson saw reading – and how one was taught to read – as integral to the psychological and social development of the reader, but her psychological model places emphasis on the individual’s discovery of their identity, whereas with Eliot, we have the sense that the reader is acted on and defined by the texts to which they are exposed. The fundamental difference between the two approaches, then, centres on the assertion of individuality and social (dis)empowerment. Whilst Richardson acknowledges reading to be a two-way process, with the reader imposing ideas onto the text as well as receiving them, there is a marked emphasis on the text functioning as a sounding board for the reader’s ideas about their identity. As discussed in Chapter Two, Eliot’s model employs G. H. Lewes’s idea of the mind as a palimpsest: each time Eliot’s female readers read, their psychology is altered, or rewritten, depending on the extent to which they are passive or active readers. The brain is largely a receptive instrument in this model, and the identity is forged through repeated exposure to literature and other stimuli. For Richardson, the identity is already formed prior to exposure to literature, but the individual does not yet understand themselves; to put it another way, they are not yet conscious of their identity, or, to use Richardson’s term, of their Being.⁶⁶ In *Pilgrimage*, this idea is presented through Miriam experimenting with models of femininity in texts. In Richardson’s work, active reading is a form of self-education,⁶⁷ in which the innate ‘real self’ or Being, is always present and unchanging, but the reader’s ability to recognise it develops as they find and reject identities they discover in their reading (*Tu*, II, 101).

Miriam demonstrates this process of discovering her Being through reading in her response to realist discourses, all of which present biased opinions about women as reality. Rather than passively absorbing the female identities laid out for her in literature, Miriam repeatedly and emphatically rejects the models laid out for her in these texts. Unlike Maggie Tulliver who unquestioningly accepts the doctrine of a ‘supreme Teacher,’ when Miriam reads *The Imitation of Christ* she instantly questions the logic of the Kempis’s argument, and the authority of the Christian institution as a whole, particularly its attitudes towards gender (*H*, I, 457-9).⁶⁸ She states that she refuses to ‘leave her mind open’ for men who ‘don’t agree amongst themselves’ about religious doctrine to ‘do what [they like] with’ (*B*, I, 258). In

⁶⁶ For a detailed exploration of the concepts of Being and Becoming in Richardson’s writing, see Eveline Killian, ‘Gliding, as if forever’: Speed and Movement in Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008), 27-49, esp. pp. 39-43.

⁶⁷ Labovitz, pp. 32-3.

⁶⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 290.

response to Spencerian arguments about woman's biological function, Miriam has no qualms about telling Hypo Wilson that '[n]o man, or woman, can ever engage the whole of my interest who believes, as you believe [...] that my one driving-force [...] is the formation within myself of another human being' (*CH*, IV, 331). We also find Miriam outraged at Darwinian definitions of women in scientific discourses as '*inferior*; mentally, morally, intellectually, and physically... her development arrested in the interest of her special functions' (*Tu*, II, 220). The same problem exists in realist fiction written by men. While Michael Shatov sees *Anna Karenina* (1886) as a most masterly study' – 'study' implying something based in fact – 'of a certain type of woman,' Miriam describes it as '[t]he story of a woman told by a man with a man's ideas about people' and declares that she 'can't see anything wonderful. It isn't true' (*D*, III, 61, 59, 62). Similarly, she is adamant that '[t]here was no reality in any of Shakespeare's women' because they are constructed only in relation to men: 'They please men because they show women as men see them. All other things are invisible; nothing but their thoughts and feelings about men' (*Tu*, II, 188).

These texts all represent modes of consciousness which Richardson associates with Becoming. This is a movement of the individual from one state to being to another, with no recognition of their deeper self: in this approach, women move from one superficial role to another, such as from wife to mother, according to the inadequate systems of thought and shallow, male-constructed models of womanhood created through a variety of discourses, scientific, or otherwise, which purport to present reality. Realist literature written from a 'masculine' perspective does not, and cannot, present the world as viewed by women; it can only present women as men want them to be.

To illustrate the risks of reading such texts passively, Richardson surrounds Miriam Henderson with a number of passive female readers whose engagement with realist discourses results in social disempowerment. As in *The Mill on the Floss*, Richardson's arguments about the damage caused by dominant female reading practices often arise in response to her heroine's experiences in the school-room.⁶⁹ In her experiences working as a teacher in two schools in Hanover and North London, for Miriam it is evident from the lack of ambition amongst the female students, who feel no pride in their learning and who look forward to being 'well willed,' 'pure,' 'brainless' wives (*PR*, I, 129; *Tu*, II, 196), that they have been successfully inculcated with the dominant, limited concepts of femininity encoded in nineteenth-century novels. In North London, permitted reading material is markedly

⁶⁹ Richardson herself was highly sceptical about 'female education,' calling her own brief experience of it as a young girl with a governess 'torture unmitigated'. See Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, p. 14.

traditional. It includes 'harmless' examples of Victorian sentimental piety such as the 'sanguine, golden' *Fairchild Family*, *Jessica's First Prayer* and *The Lamplighter*, which enshrine conventional ideals about femininity and female purity. Margaret Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family* (1818) consists of a series of moral fables about an Evangelical family designed to inculcate its young readers with Christian values.⁷⁰ In a similar vein, Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) tells the tale of a young waif who discovers Christianity and prompts an elderly church-warden to embrace his religion through her moral goodness.⁷¹ Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), a Victorian bestseller, is a didactic novel which documents the transformation of a peevish child into a domestic angel, an 'exemplar of female martyrdom.'⁷² A range of works by Dickens which Miriam finds 'suspicious' offer some stark contrasts in their subject matter, but ultimately reinforce similar ideas about femininity and female purity.⁷³

At Hanover, the only storybook Miriam can find is *The Story of Adèle* (B, I, 226-7). I have been unable to trace further details about this novel, but its contents are indicated in Richardson's description of the book. Miriam describes the cover as 'unpleasant' and 'hard,' covered with 'some thin cottony material' of 'bright lobelia blue' which 'strain[s]' and 'fray[s] out at the corners.' It is decorated with 'garlands and festoons of faded gold, and in the centre framed by an oval band of brighter gold was the word Adèle, with little strong tendrils on the lettering' (B, I, 227). The implication from the florid cover and the equally florid description of a garden given in the excerpt Miriam reads is a nineteenth-century concept of femininity which, like the book's cheap, bright cover, is wearing thin and fraying at the edges. At the same time, the battered cover suggests that this book has been well used and enjoyed by students at the school, and that many young women have read this and been willingly inculcated with its limiting messages about femininity, messages which reinforce the roles they have been assigned by their teachers in the school-room: Miriam is struck by the 'supercilious' male masters' contempt for female learning, and the intellectual gender hierarchy they establish in the classroom. There is an absurd logic at work in these institutions whereby women are taught they are not intellectual, and inculcated with a desire not to be educated so that school seems like a 'prison' to them: 'What they were going to do

⁷⁰ See Nancy Cutt, *Mrs. Sherwood and her Books for Children* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 63-66.

⁷¹ Hesba Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1867).

⁷² Kimberley Devlin, 'The Romance Heroine Exposed: "Nausicaa" and "The Lamplighter"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 22 (1985), 383-96, pp. 383-4.

⁷³ See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 24.

with their lives was only too plain. All [...] had already a complete outfit of house-linen [...] All could cook [...] What a prison school must seem [...] In the end [Miriam] ceased to wonder that the German masters dealt out their wares to these girls so superciliously' (*PR*, I, 82).

Rather than understanding their Being, the female students in Hanover and North London are indoctrinated with what Richardson considered to be the 'masculine' mode of consciousness, Becoming.⁷⁴ By encouraging female students to read such material unquestioningly, society continues to churn out identical women who will take a subsidiary role to men: '[t]here'll never be anything more than this, here,' Miriam thinks. 'It would always be the same – with different girls' who will live out their lives as '[r]efined shrews, turning in circles, like moths on pins' (*B*, I, 287; *Tu*, II, 196).

After detailing her experiences as a teacher in Hanover and North London in the first two-chapter novels of *Pilgrimage*, Richardson uses the third, *Honeycomb* (1917), to expand on her vision of these girls 'turning in circles' like 'moths on pins' in married adult life. Richardson describes the deaths (one figurative, one literal) of two female readers in this third instalment. The full psychological ramifications of female passive reading practices and limited exposure to literature are presented unforgivingly in the portrait of Mrs. Corrie, for whom Miriam works as a governess:

Mrs. Corrie had sat deep in her large chair, dead and drowned. Dead because of something she had never known. Dead in ignorance and living bravely on [in] a gloom where there were no thoughts. Nearly all women were like that, living in a gloom where there were no thoughts [...] no room for ideas; except in smoking-rooms – and – laboratories... She was a good woman.

(*H*, I, 404)

Mrs. Corrie, who 'attend[s] only to what [the author] said, and not to him,' reads realism written by men, with its 'happy' or 'sad ending,' without questioning the author's motivations and how he endeavours to manipulate the reader (*H*, I, 385, 383-4). By failing to think for herself, to question the reading deemed appropriate for her, she hands over authority of her identity to the men discussing ideas in 'smoking rooms' and 'laboratories.' To Miriam, she resembles a portrait by an 'old master' (358); she is the superficial image of a woman created by male ideas, and has never come to understand her own Being.

The severity of Mrs. Corrie's presentation is linked to Miriam's mother, who commits suicide at the end of *Honeycomb*. Like the students in Hanover, this '[d]elicate little mother'

⁷⁴ See Killian, esp. pp. 39-43.

has been raised in such a way as to 'ha[ve] no reasoning power' (*PR*, I, 169), the lack which is linked to her treatment by the male authority figures in her life:

Her mother read 'the leaders' in the evening – 'excellent leader' she sometimes said, and her father would put down his volume of *Proceedings of the British Associations*, or Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, and condescendingly agree. But any discussion generally ended in his warning her not to believe a thing because she saw it in print, and a reminder that before she married she had thought that everything she saw in print was true, and quite often he would go on to general remarks about the gullibility of women.

(*B*, I, 234)

This instance is starkly symbolic. Mr. Henderson's reading explicitly signals his concurrence with Spencerian ideas about female intellect, the same ideas which we saw at work in the schools in Hanover and North London. Women like Mrs. Henderson are taught through the male authority figures in their lives and through literature that their intellectual opinions are valueless, and then condemned for it.

This is an idea which Mrs. Henderson comes to espouse. She tells her daughter that her life 'has been so useless' shortly before her suicide. Like Mrs. Corrie, Miriam's mother has 'done her duty all her life' as a woman, 'doing thing after thing' that did not 'satisf[y] her. There was something she had always wanted, for herself' (*H*, I, 472). To have accepted, as a 'good' woman should, that independent thought belongs to men brings about a psychological state of entrapment resulting in self-destruction.

This accounts for Miriam's supposed hatred of women. After her description of Mrs. Corrie, Miriam suggests '[p]erhaps I can't stand women because I'm a sort of horrid man' (*H*, I, 404): she cannot and will not identify with this image of womanhood, and thus hates women who present that fate. Critics like Gloria Glikin and John Rosenberg have pointed to Richardson's hatred of women as documented in *Pilgrimage*, citing it as a point of bonding between Richardson and her husband Alan Odle,⁷⁵ but Miriam's discomfort is not with women per se, but a particular type of woman who presents this frightening, self-destructive mirror image. She is coming to realise that to be passive about one's reading is to accept misogynistic social structures which seek to degrade and diminish women, and thus to disempower oneself.

Richardson's portraits of Mrs. Corrie and Mrs. Henderson present a clear case for the social importance of active reading practices for women. The mother's suicide is a passionate

⁷⁵ See Gloria Glikin, 'Dorothy M. Richardson: The Personal "Pilgrimage"', *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 586-600, p. 594; Rosenberg, p. 64.

call to readers to reject traditional ideas about women's reading and to begin to trust their own judgement, and make their own reading choices not only for their own sakes, but for social change and progress for women in British society. If literature is as instrumental in identity formation as Richardson shows in these early chapter-novels *Pilgrimage*, women's approaches must change to counter dominant patriarchal ones.

To read *Pilgrimage*, one would easily conclude that the literary marketplace was almost bereft of female authors and dominated by prejudiced, male thinkers. This exaggerated portrait of the literary scene in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain is designed to provoke the reader by presenting 'masculine' realist discourses as a social evil which needs remedying through active female reading, and also through female authorship. The female reader is encouraged firstly to reject these works, and to follow Miriam's example in the later chapter-novels by redressing the gender imbalance in the literary marketplace by taking up their pens.

As Allison Pease has noted, Miriam's encounter with these books bears a strong resemblance to the episode in the British Museum which would later be described by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where she despairs of the endless books written by angry male professors and authors perpetuating the myth of the 'mental, moral and physical inferiority of women.'⁷⁶ *Pilgrimage* presents Miriam dismissing male authors as 'angry men lost in fog' and their literature as 'poisoned,' and she despairs that the male-dominated canon at this time – 'the classics, the finest literature' – remains enshrined in literary culture, 'unsurpassed' (*I, Tu*, II, 443, 222, 219). It seems odd that Richardson does not acknowledge Woolf, or any of her other female contemporaries, who were employing the same arguments as she was in their writing at this time. One might argue that to recognise a writer like Woolf would make the need for writing like Richardson's seem less urgent – to take *Pilgrimage* at face value, Richardson's female-centred writing seems to be not only desirable, but a matter of social urgency. However, there is evidence that Richardson did not feel that Woolf's writing was radical enough, and that it was too involved in the nineteenth-century concepts of gender as George Eliot's fiction was. We see this in Richardson's defensive 'Foreword' (1938), in which she claims that 'the role of pathfinder' had been wrongly attributed to writers like Woolf who had joined her on her 'lonely track' and made it 'a populous

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 33-42. See Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 84-5.

highway.’⁷⁷ What rankled Richardson was that her radical feminist aesthetics were being overshadowed by a female writer whom Richardson considered as ‘a man’s, almost a male, writer.’⁷⁸

This raises the question: why were the writings of female contemporaries like Woolf not radical enough for Richardson? Richardson was one of many female modernists offering alternatives to realism and its definition of women in a social and artistic context, however Richardson clearly did not feel that her fellow women were providing apt solutions or models. One solution, which significantly derives from Eliot, came from Virginia Woolf, the idea of the ideal female author as an androgynous being, and in examining Richardson’s response to this prevalent idea, we can see her revising Eliot’s ideal of how a woman should be defined in relation to patriarchal social and artistic authority. In fact, Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* may be read as an account of how she grappled with this idea of ‘androgyny,’ found it to be flawed, and was prompted to develop her own ideas about gender, and how to define herself as a woman, a feminist and a woman writer.

Constructing the ‘Feminine’ Reader-Author

Pilgrimage not only encourages its readers to follow Miriam by becoming more conscious of the motivations behind the writing of ‘masculine’ texts and how they are reading them, but it also encourages female readers to take up the pen themselves. As Virginia Woolf suggested in her portrait of the elusive Mrs. Brown in 1923, if social ideas about women were discursively formed, then cultural progression towards a new, more egalitarian concept of femininity was dependent on female writers redressing the gender imbalance in the literary marketplace and representing female subjective experience on the page.⁷⁹ However, unlike Woolf and many of her contemporaries, Richardson was adamant that these issues could not be redressed through the implementation of Eliot’s androgynous ideal.

In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf’s seminal essay on women and writing, Woolf famously suggests that an androgynous approach to literature is the way forward for women’s literature, specifically for creating a literary tradition for future female writers. Her model is a reworking of Eliot’s: Woolf suggests that only when a ‘fusion’ of feminine and masculine takes place is a mind ‘fully fertilized’ and capable of ‘us[ing] all its faculties.’ This model also recalls Eliot’s in the sense that it undercuts itself by ascribing to the gendered

⁷⁷ Richardson, ‘Foreword’, pp. 11, 10.

⁷⁸ Letter to John Cooper Powys, Apr. 24 1940, in Fromm, *Windows*, p. 400.

⁷⁹ See Goldman, pp. 40-44.

concepts of literary engagement widely employed in the nineteenth century: for example, Woolf later adds that 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex [...] in any way to speak consciously as a woman,' but criticises Galsworthy and Kipling for having not 'a spark of woman' in them, a fault which makes their writing 'incomprehensible' to female readers.⁸⁰

Richardson is the only author in this thesis to recognise the contradictions inherent in Eliot's (and Woolf's) androgynous model, and hence to understand why Maggie Tulliver was a thwarted author and had to drown at the end of her narrative. Richardson illustrates why the androgynous model is an inadequate solution to Eliot's authorship dilemma through Miriam, who cannot find an acceptable reflection of herself in the established nineteenth-century gendered framework on which this androgynous model is dependent. Instead, Miriam moves towards an alternative which, on the face of it, seems essentialist: Richardson tells us that the ideal female reader-author is 'feminine,' and explains the reasoning behind her assertion that Woolf was a 'masculine' writer. As Miriam develops her ideas about these gender categories and gives them new meaning, Richardson is effectively teaching her female readers how to create a socially-productive, self-creating (or artistic) identity for themselves.

In the early chapter-novels of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam makes contradictory statements about her gender as she grapples with the idea of herself as an androgynous being: when she feels critical of women like Mrs. Corrie, she concludes that she must be a 'horrid man' (*H*, I, 404); Miriam often contradicts herself, repeatedly saying she has a 'masculine' brain, while expressing dismay at the prospect of having a 'masculine' mind (see *RL*, III, 236 cf. *Tu*, II, 149-50); she also claims to be 'something between a man and a woman; looking both ways' (*Tu*, II, 187; also *D*, III, 221). In response to the inadequacy of these categories, Miriam begins to reconsider the definitions of masculine and feminine thinking, ideas which evolve through her interactions with literature.

Let us first look at how the definition of 'masculine' reading evolves over the course of *Pilgrimage*. In Eliot's Victorian model, the same model adopted by the male writers Miriam rejects, masculine reading is active and objective, involving the questioning of texts through logical thought processes. At times, Miriam echoes this: 'masculine' thinking is 'logical,' a science, concerned with matters of intellect, not sentiment or domestic matters (*Tr*, III, 475, *Tu*, II, 223). However, as Miriam grows to understand herself, to discover her Being, we understand her idea of 'masculine' reading, and consciousness in general, in fact, as being synonymous with a fear of women and the imposition of meaning:

⁸⁰ Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', pp. 128, 133, 136.

A man's reading [...] was always an assertion of himself. Men read in loud harsh unnatural voices, in sentences, or with voices that were a commentary on the text, as if they were telling you what to think... they preferred reading to being read to; they read as if they were the authors of the text. Nothing could get through them but what they saw. They were like showmen...

(*Tu*, II, 261)

'Masculine' reading, and by extension, 'masculine' writing, is for Richardson a performance of the identity, a purely narcissistic, albeit active, venture, and a means of perpetuating patriarchal ideology. This is not a category specific to men only – as we saw earlier, Richardson was critical of the 'masculine' writing of female realists. Rather, it stands for a destructive approach to literature and an equally destructive way of thinking about women. According to her definition then, Richardson's ideal female reader cannot be a 'masculine' thinker to any degree.

Richardson's definition of the 'feminine' reader also develops over the course of *Pilgrimage*. In reading Richardson's work, we become slowly aware of her differentiation between 'feminine' as a nineteenth-century social construct which involves 'play[ing] [a] part' and adhering to traditional standards of female behaviour (*Tr*, III, 486; *O*, IV, 82), and 'feminine' as defined by the author. Richardson is reluctant to describe exactly what constitutes 'feminine' reading and authorship, other than its rejection of 'masculine' ideas about women and their relationship with the written word; in short, what we would term feminist. Having accepted the untruth about women endorsed by 'masculine' realist discourses, Miriam no longer seeks to find herself through reading, but to assert her authority over her own identity by expressing it in her own 'feminine' writing. The act of authorship is liberating: the pen, which breaks the silence like speech, functions as a metaphorical voice (*D*, III, 133). Miriam's writing table becomes the centre of her world:

Nothing would matter now that the paper-scattered lamplit circle was established as the centre of life. Everything would be an everlastingly various joyful coming back. Held up by this secret place, drawing her energy from it, any sort of life would do that left this room and its little table free and untouched.

(*D*, III, 134)

The table is a stable centre point for Miriam's existence, an apt metaphor for her unchanging 'secret' 'feminine' Being which forms the basis of all her writing. For Miriam, to be 'feminine' is to become the indefinable centre and authority in one's own life. Accordingly,

as *Pilgrimage* progresses into the final chapter-novels, Richardson's third person narration increasingly slips into the first person.⁸¹

We also note that as Miriam's writing takes this central role in her life, life outside her authorship becomes peripheral as a result, and this has significant implications for the relationship between authorship and female social identity:

The week of working days, standing between her and next Sunday's opportunity [to write], was a small space that would pass in a dream; the scattered variously-developing interests of life outside Wimpole Street changed, under her eyes, from separate bewildering competitively attractive scraps of life, to pleasantly related resources, permitted distractions from an engrossment so secure that she could, without fear of loss, move away and forget it [...] It meant putting life and people second; only entering life to come back again, *always*. This new joy of going into life, the new beauty, in everything, was the certainty of coming back.

(*D*, III, 135-6)

This inner authority that writing confers on Miriam is shown to be socially empowering. As Miriam becomes increasingly detached, she transforms from a young girl who is so angry at the behaviour of people around her that her 'head will burst' (*Tu*, II, 223), to a calm young woman who is confident in contradicting prejudiced statements about women, and more importantly, confident that their ideas do not reflect her or her experience. This allows her to maintain relationships with people whose ideas she might otherwise have found threatening, namely individuals like Hypo Wilson and Densley who espouse Spencerian ideas about women's social role and female intellectual capabilities (see *CH*, IV, 331, 380). These men and their systems of thought become specimens under a microscope to Miriam, to be observed with interest, because their ideas no longer define her and they are therefore no longer a threat to her. This sense of distance also means that she can view these men and their ideas objectively, and so is able to evoke them truthfully in her writing. In opposition to Eliot, for whom authorship requires empathy and therefore emotional involvement, for Richardson, being aloof is the only way to be a truthful writer and an independent thinker.

On a more abstract level, the idea of Miriam as a spectator is pertinent to Richardson's ideas about language. Just as Miriam is aware of the gendered framework that surrounds life around her, she is also aware of the gendered ideas that surround language. Language, according to Miriam, is a 'masculine' form, and women are 'beyond' it: with women, Richardson writes, 'speech seems superfluous [...] [y]et it would be easier to make all this clear to a man than to a woman. The very words expressing it have been made by

⁸¹ Laura Marcus, 'Dorothy Richardson: *Pilgrimage*', in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 440-1.

men' (*RL*, III, 280-1). Language, used conventionally, is another system associated with Becoming in *Pilgrimage*, which seeks to impose structure and meaning onto womanhood.

Here, Richardson touches on some of the problems critics identified in the stance on language adopted in *écriture féminine* in the 1970s.⁸² If language is a masculine medium, how can it be used to convey a feminine perspective? Does this not automatically bar women from a mode of authorship that is not patriarchal in its thinking? How can Richardson relate her experience, how can she express the truth that gender is a cultural construct when she does so through language which is based upon this gender bias? In other words, how can Richardson affirm, or even express her uninhibited, 'feminine,' artistic identity through prose? Richardson's answer to this, which marks her out from the other female authors in this study, is her experimental 'feminine' prose, which is 'unpunctuated, moving from point to point without formal obstruction.'⁸³ At times, Richardson refuses to complete a sentence, or thought, instead allowing it to trail off in ellipses which demonstrate that Miriam's thinking has gone beyond the limits of language. As we have seen, part of Richardson's subversion of literary convention includes not only punctuation, but meaning: the term 'feminine' is deconstructed and redefined to give it a fluid meaning which leaves it beyond description. And of course, it is this fluid prose that the autobiographical heroine herself produces. Richardson is suggesting that as part of redressing the gender imbalance in the literary scene, women writers must reclaim language. It is fitting that *Pilgrimage* does not have an end⁸⁴ as it means that there is no final statement on Miriam, no final image that defines her for Richardson's readers; none of the 'curtain-dropping finalities' of realism that hindered Eliot in her search for a female reader-author.⁸⁵

At the same time, Richardson's claim that she is seeking a purer, more honest form of realism, or hyper realism, through her portrait of Miriam is problematised by the notable lack of exploration of Richardson's anxieties about her vocation in her fiction. In her essay 'Women in the Arts' (1925), she describes 'absolute conditions' required for 'artistic achievement' as quiet, solitude and the 'freedom from preoccupations,' and describes how culturally, these conditions are denied to women.

⁸² See Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 107.

⁸³ Richardson, 'Foreword', p. 12; Virginia Woolf, 'Romance and the Heart', p. 367.

⁸⁴ Richardson passed away before she was able to complete it.

⁸⁵ Dorothy Richardson, 'Data for a Spanish Publisher', in *Journey to Paradise*, ed. Trudi Tate (London: Virago, 1989), p. 139.

Art demands what, to women, current civilization won't give. There is for a Dostoyevsky writing on the corner of a crowded kitchen table a greater possibility of detachment than for a woman artist, no matter how placed. Neither motherhood nor the more continuously exacting and indefinitely expanding responsibilities of even the simplest housekeeping can so effectively hamper her as the human demand, besieging her wherever she is, for an inclusive awareness, from which men, for good or ill, are exempt.⁸⁶

As Woolf would claim in 1929, to be a writer a woman must have a room of her own, but being bound to her ailing husband Alan Odle and unable to spend uninterrupted hours writing, this was not possible for Richardson. On one level, Richardson's essay is an apologia: if *Pilgrimage* did not achieve what it set out to do, Richardson is saying, then it is because of the claims on her time and energy, the 'human demand' made on her, namely in the form of her husband, who is never mentioned in *Pilgrimage*.⁸⁷ She often singled out particular passages in her writing which did not meet her expectations, which she marked 'I.R.,' standing for 'imperfectly realised,' and her 1938 preface to *Pilgrimage* ends with 'a heart-felt apology' to the reader for the 'chaos' of her writing.⁸⁸

Richardson was also anxious about criticism of her work, but in a way that is distinct from Eliot. If *Pilgrimage* was required in order to redress the balance and present uninhibited and unadulterated female thinking and social experience, then recognition that *Pilgrimage* represented reality for women was imperative. That is to say, critical understanding of her work was a necessary acknowledgement that her authorship was socially valuable.

This accounts for her reaction to certain instances of negative criticism. On the whole, Richardson seemed undaunted by negative responses to *Pilgrimage*: she happily dismissed reviews of *Interim* as 'mostly quite irrelevant either in fury or adulation,' and told Edward Garnett she could not 'feel wrath' about the 'frenzied loathing' of her work, going on to say about Katherine Mansfield, the author of unflattering reviews of *Interim* and *The Tunnel*, '[she is] as clever as old Nick. But a woman has a right to be, & I like her.'⁸⁹ However, whilst Richardson was not concerned about whether readers liked her writing, it was a different matter when they did not understand it, because it meant they did not understand or recognise the authentic, 'feminine' voice in her writing. Reviews of *Interim* caused considerable anxiety in this respect. In response to one review which saw her worldview as 'fragmentary', Richardson admitted the chapter-novel was 'thin & badly foreshortened,' but was annoyed

⁸⁶ Richardson, 'Women in the Arts', pp. 47, 100.

⁸⁷ See Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, p. 169.

⁸⁸ See Gillian E. Hanscombe, 'Introduction', in *Pilgrimage, Vol. I* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 7; Richardson, 'Foreword', p. 12.

⁸⁹ Letters to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, Feb. 21 1920, Apr. 20 1923 and Feb. 21 1920, in Fromm, *Windows*, pp. 41, 68, 41n8.

that the reviewer could not see she was describing the “fragmentary etc.’ world of an adolescent.”⁹⁰ In contrast to Eliot, Richardson’s fears were far less rooted in self-doubt than how external circumstances beyond her control shaped the reception of her art – issues of having the time and energy to fulfil her artistic potential, and of people being receptive to the messages in her fiction.

The critical world might not have been quite ready for *Pilgrimage*, but it was certainly an important step forward for many women. One of the strongest responses came from author Winifred Bryher, who became acquainted with Richardson in 1923. Bryher was so delighted at reading a novel that presented a female perspective that she reportedly rang a friend and ‘shouted,’ ‘*somebody is writing about us.*’⁹¹ She went on to describe the impact of reading *Pilgrimage* in her 1962 memoir:

I have always told my friends abroad that if they want to know what England was like between 1890 and 1914, they must read *Pilgrimage* [...] Miriam’s England was the England that I saw [...] [Richardson was] fighting not for dogmas of any colour but for the elementary rights of an inarticulate body of women who were treated like slaves until the end of the First World War [...] S]he was the Baedeker of all our early experiences and I have read and reread *Pilgrimage* throughout my life.⁹²

Whilst Bryher endorses Richardson’s idea of *Pilgrimage* as the first novel to present real female social experience, her language suggests there is something aspirational about the text for her. She sees Richardson as a political figure, a ‘fight[er]’ for women. Richardson does not, like Madame de Staël, elevate an extraordinary female artist only to cut her down at the end of the narrative, leaving readers of *Corinne* like Maggie Tulliver with mixed messages about female artistry; instead, she omits her artistic anxieties, ironically like the realists she censured, to present an artistic ideal intermingled with her own experiences. One wonders if Bryher’s response would have been the same if Richardson had expressed her artistic anxieties through her writing. As it was, Richardson had successfully presented a slightly distorted portrait of reality which made female readers feel empowered and validated. Unlike Miriam, who cannot find herself in fiction and discards her reading in favour of her own writing, female readers like Winifred Bryher were discovering an attainable female artistic and social role model in their reading.

⁹⁰ Letter to Edward Garnett, Feb. 7 1920, in Fromm, *Windows*, pp. 48-9.

⁹¹ Winifred Bryher, ‘D.R.’, *Adam International Review*, 31 (1967), 22-3, p. 22.

⁹² Winifred Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer’s Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 173, 34, 174.

Conclusion

Through her development of Eliot's realist aesthetic and her appropriation of Eliot's use of the female reader as a representative of the female author, Richardson's *Pilgrimage* demonstrates that Eliot's fiction represented far more for Richardson than an outdated model of Victorian realism. Recognising its innovative approach to representing female thinking and experience on the page, it provided Richardson with a template from which to address the still contentious issue of the relationship between gender and authorship, and more fundamentally, between women and patriarchal authority. For Richardson, Eliot's fiction was caught between the two poles of patriarchal and feminist thought, and throughout her writing career, she struggled to define her as an author in terms of gender. Unable to entirely reconcile Eliot with her own feminism, but recognising what an important and pioneering literary model she was, Richardson quietly claimed Eliot for her own through her career-long reworking of *The Mill on the Floss* in *Pilgrimage* while distancing herself from Eliot through her silence about the writer.

By the end of *Pilgrimage*, Richardson has broken the cycle presented by Maggie Tulliver's reading of *Corinne* in *The Mill on the Floss*, wherein women read contradictory messages about their relationship with patriarchal social and artistic authorities and imbibe those ideas. Maggie emulates the heroine of *Corinne*, dying as a thwarted artist at the close of her own narrative; by contrast, Miriam, who survives beyond her narrative, embodies the artistic and social paradigm Eliot sought out, the figure who combined 'femininity' and intellectual authorship.

Where Richardson succeeds is in her recognition that in order to escape the gendered categories used to devalue female literary engagement, it was not sufficient to contradict or subvert them as Eliot attempts to do in her fiction, but necessary to deconstruct and redefine them. Miriam uses language, but on her own terms; she begins as a reader, seeking herself in fiction, and transforms into a self-created and self-creating writer. Richardson's *Pilgrimage* presents a fundamental rejection of patriarchal authority, and the assertion of social self-authority through the medium of literary art. She recognises that literature functions as a mediator between the individual and socially-endorsed ideas about the role of the individual, and one's reading style determines the direction in which meaning flows between the two. Miriam's pilgrimage tells us that a woman must be self-defining and enter into dialogue with her society; she must write herself, or else be written.

Conclusion

By focussing on the reading woman, this study sharpens our sense of Eliot as a writer who was fundamentally conflicted over the question of women's relationship with patriarchal social and artistic authorities. Eliot scholars have acknowledged that the author was undecided on these points, but these claims have often been based on Eliot's more explicit dealings with these questions, such as her essays and her efforts to evade the 'Woman Question' in her correspondence. The debates about female creativity to which the figure of the reading woman gives rise allowed Eliot to explore her own attitudes and responses to these issues almost undetected, and without courting controversy. Through an examination of the reading woman, therefore, we uncover a more honest, and unvarnished portrait of Eliot's contradictory attitudes about female authorship, and her repeated attempts to resolve them.

In the transatlantic literary tradition identified in this thesis, authors' representations of the reading woman demonstrate a repeated attempt to conceive of a model of authorship which is extricated from the language and ideas employed by misogynistic literary commentators. It is fitting, then, that the one author who is successful in this venture is Richardson, who rejects the authority of language. In various ways, the thinking of other female writers in this study ultimately remains trapped within the gendered binary established in patriarchal literary criticism.

This study has shown that Eliot functions as a mediating figure in this dialogue between female literary artists and literary commentators, a prism through which they engaged with gender-biased criticism. This is because Eliot embodied the ongoing conflict between female authors and these branches of criticism in numerous ways: masculine and feminine, sexless and gendered, active and passive, intellectual and emotional, scandalous and conventional, oppressed and free, patriarchal and feminist, pioneering and imitative, exceptional and typical – Eliot and her fiction embodied all these contradictions for her readers. Surrounding Eliot, then, was a sense of instability. The author and her fiction articulated a range of questions and dilemmas shared by female literary artists, but offered no effective way of answering or resolving them.

The contradictory ideas about female creativity that arose from Eliot's literary reception and that are encoded in her representations of female readers understandably appealed to and provoked women whose literary environment presented mixed and often hostile messages about female creativity. Writing in periods where the identity of the female

author was constantly and actively being challenged and reformulated, for the female authors examined in this study, Eliot and her fiction embodied a range of ideas about what it was to be a writer and a woman.

The clearest example of where Eliot presented contradictory ideas for a female writer comes with Woolson. In her American phase of writing, Eliot was important to Woolson because she and her fiction embodied Woolson's struggles with the idea that authorship detracted from a woman's femininity, and her hopes of resolving this tension. Woolson based her artistic identity on an image of Eliot which she was suddenly compelled to revise after she emigrated to Europe, and in order to understand how her writing developed, it is imperative that we understand how her attitudes towards the writer changed. Readings of Woolson's work which are concerned with gender tend towards celebratory, feminist interpretations. They often show Woolson writing polemically about misogynistic literary criticism, most notably through her most famous short story 'Miss Grief.' The scholarship of Anne E. Boyd and Lyndall Gordon has begun to unearth a more complex and troubled account of the author's writing career, and continuing in this line, my study presents the portrait of a writer attempting to use Eliot as a role model in order to make the transition between antebellum ideals of femininity and authorship and the ambitious 'New Woman' writing that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in America.

For Wharton, the conflicting images of Eliot that inform her relationship with the writer are that of the inferior 'feminine' or 'sentimental' author and that of the intellectual 'masculine' artist. In some ways, it is clear that Wharton used Eliot's dual status to her advantage, identifying herself with Eliot and distancing herself from her where it suited her. At the same time, in the pivotal seven year period of artistic identity formation that my chapter on Wharton identifies, we can also see that she understood the pitfalls of these gendered categories, and that she was trying to define herself outside of them. However, her preoccupation with Eliot, and her continued use of the author as a point of reference for her artistic self-definition, meant that her thinking about authorship remained trapped within these oppositions. In this sense, Eliot was a debilitating literary role model for Wharton, and her relationship with the author – one of both intense admiration and ambivalence – was a determining factor in the 'masculine' scientist persona she cultivated through her female readers in her writing.

The success of Richardson's response to Eliot comes in her ability to salvage her fiction from the debilitating gender categories that hindered Woolson and Wharton in their search for an artistic identity. She is hesitant about identifying herself with Eliot, unable to

decide whether her writing is patriarchal or feminist in its outlook, but rather than oscillating between the two extremes in her response to the author and her fiction, she takes Eliot's realist aesthetic and her representations of reading and reformulates them in a way that takes them out of this restrictive gendered framework. If Wharton's relationship with Eliot has been underplayed in Wharton scholarship largely because of her hostility towards female authors, Richardson's emphatic opposition to nineteenth-century realism has meant that modernist critics have almost entirely overlooked her relationship with the Eliot. As my chapter has demonstrated, however, our understanding of *Pilgrimage* is deepened in the knowledge that it is a career-long response to Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*. By elucidating the relationship between the two authors, I have situated Richardson beyond the British modernist movement within a broader tradition of female authorship with its roots in Eliot's nineteenth-century realism.

Amongst Eliot's female readers, Woolson, Wharton and Richardson demonstrate a unique and intense awareness of the ideas and arguments that informed Eliot's representations of female readers. Their appropriation of the figure of the female reader in their fiction speaks of a highly charged sense of identification with the writer and the anxieties she felt about the compatibility of her gender and her vocation. We might also see their appropriation of the fictional reading woman as an allusion to themselves as readers of Eliot: they articulated how profoundly their reading of her fiction impacted on their sense of identity as authors by constructing artistic identities through the figure of the reading woman in their fiction.

An examination of the fictional female reader, then, allows us to trace a complex debate about female authorship in women's fiction, but also the questionable impact of a problematic literary predecessor. There remains some question as to what extent Eliot was an enabling or disabling literary role model for her female descendants. What we can conclude, however, is that she was imprinted, for better or worse, on the cultural consciousness as the foremost female author in the English language, and through an examination of the fictional female reader, we have a clearer understanding of what an enduring, crucial, and often divisive literary figure she was for women writers in Britain and America.

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